Communists and British Society 1920-1991

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INTRODUCTION

A dominant view of the communist party as an institution is that it provided a closed, well-ordered and intrusive political environment. The leading French scholars Claude Pennetier and Bernard Pudal discern in it a resemblance to Erving Goffman’s concept of a ‘total institution’. Brigitte Studer, another international authority, follows Sigmund Neumann in referring to it as ‘a party of absolute integration’; transcending national distinctions, at least in the Comintern period (1919–43) it is supposed to have comprised ‘a unitary system— which acted in an integrative fashion world-wide’. For those working within the so-called ‘totalitarian’ paradigm, the validity of such ‘total’ or ‘absolute’ conceptions of communist politics has always been axiomatic. Cruder recitations of the party ‘line’ have typically adopted them unquestioningly. More recently, fuller documentation of the Comintern’s apparatus of controls, seemingly replicated in all but their most extreme forms by individual communist parties, has prompted renewed interest in the encompassing character of communist commitment. At the same time, traditional emphases on the instruments of authority have been supplemented and enriched by culturalist approaches and the growth of interest in communist mentalities. In a British context, Raphael Samuel provided a virtuoso rendition of such themes in an acclaimed series of articles published in 1984–5. Tellingly, like the doyenne of French communist historians, Annie Kriegel, he took as his theme not the mentalities of the party’s followers, but ‘the’ mentality, singular. Brilliantly depicted as a ‘lost world’, it seemed self-contained and almost frozen in time, with evidence from decades and communities apart placed together like fossils in a cabinet.

What many of these accounts convey is a sense both of enclosure and of what Studer calls the ‘fusion’ between the individual and the party. ‘To be a Communist was to have a complete social identity, one which transcended the limits of class, gender and nationality’, Samuel argued. Studer describes it not as a party but as a destiny, ‘at once a community,
an order, a family—a way of life'.

It meant inhabiting ‘a little private world of our own’—Samuel’s recollection—or being ‘shut up’ in a party cell; and to the strong opposition of inner citadel to the ‘outside world’ is added an emphasis on the total overhaul of one’s personal identity that adhesion to the party involved. Sandro Bellassai, writing of the Italian communist party, describes this as ‘the exemplary perception and presentation of one’s own life story divided into “before” and “after” entering the party. This “event” alone marked an existential watershed that was comparable to embracing an inner cell; and to the strong opposition of inner citadel to the “outside world” or being “shut up” in a party cell. In Britain, according to Samuel, “joining the Party was experienced as a momentous event, equivalent in its intensity—to taking a decision for Christ’.

It is this idea of a rarefied world, defined by sharp temporal and associational boundaries, which suggests the analogy with the total institution. In Goffman’s definition, cited by Pennetier and Pudal, the total institution is ‘a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life’. What Goffman had in mind were prisons, barracks, monasteries, labour camps, to which one might certainly add the intense segregation of the Comintern’s International Lenin School (ILS), attended by some 160 British communists between 1926 and 1937. The aim, in the words of an early CPGB syllabus, was that of a party hammered out of steel; but for the little band of British communists, who even in their heyday were scattered across the outside world in proportions of a thousand to one, an absolute sense of enclosure must have been especially difficult to maintain.

In sensitive accounts, the notion of totality is therefore always qualified. Pennetier and Pudal thus describe western communist parties as ‘open’ total institutions, albeit with uncertain implications given the predication of Goffman’s original conception upon confinement and the condition of the ‘inmate’. The same authors also propose a variant of Klugel’s concentric rings model of communist organisation, identifying the total institution more specifically with an inner kernel of activists and functionaries. Studer too distinguishes the ‘true’ communist in this way, while Harvey K. Lebr, in his study of the American communist party elite, has suggested that most rank-and-file party members were not ‘real’ communists in the Leninist sense. Crucially, Pennetier and Pudal also introduce the notion of ‘critical distance’ to describe the independent accumulations of cultural or political capital which allowed more negotiated relationships with the party. Specifically in the British case, Samuel acknowledged that ‘party-mindedness was not easy to impose on a membership so heterogeneous and overlapping at so many points with the labour and trade union movement’, though without himself exploring the ‘real if limited autonomies’ which resulted from this.

These are critical distinctions. Perhaps they help clarify the over-familiar historiographical exchanges in which conflicting generalisations as to autonomy or control have corresponded to, or predetermined, a focus on different aspects of the communist experience. They also allow the possibility of genuine comparison, so that Pennetier and Pudal can stress the specificity of French communism in the degree to which it conformed to the master narratives of the Comintern era. Pointedly, a major historical survey to which both they and Studer contribute bears the plural title, A Century of Communisms. In the global perspective which its editors adopt, the characterisation of communism in terms of diversity held together by a common project seems unarguable. In a more limited way, it is the assumed singularity of the communist experience, in the double sense of its oneness and distinctiveness, that we examine more closely here, even in the case of a single national variant like the communism of the CPGB.

There is no doubt that the idea of a single overriding commitment had a tremendous significance for communists themselves. The British theoretician R. Palme Dutt described it to 1930s’ student recruits as a comprehensive ‘life-outlook’:

Communism is a complete world conception covering every aspect of life, and transforming all our thinking and activity; the comradeship of Communism draws us into a great collective movement, in which all can find their realisation, and in which the old distinctions of politics and life, of political activity and private life, disappear and lose their meaning.

Dutt himself was a brilliantly gifted Oxford graduate whose intellect, conscience and career prospects were all subordinated to the party, and who gave to it something like the ‘24 hour-a-day’ commitment it is held to have demanded. In this sense, traditional historiographical emphases convey the spirit of countless party texts, exactly as K. Lebr’s definition of the ‘real’ communist mirrors the attempts at cadre formation of communist parties themselves. Nevertheless, the extent to which these ambitions were realised needs to be shown even in the lives of these ‘real’ communists, if only to establish which the real ones were and how they acquired
this quality of authenticity. Where distinctions of life and politics disappeared, nothing will be lost in testing the claim against the evidence now available to us. Where this was not the case, or only partly so, then the tensions between them may provide a more effective way of exploring both communist history itself and the wider issues of left-wing political activism which it raises.

Consequently we have adopted an 'open' research methodology unconstrained by circular definitions of the real, the formative and the significant. Though it seems to us that this open methodology is needed to demonstrates the existence even of a closed society, no doubt this also reflects the specificities of the particular 'communism', or set of communisms, with which we are dealing. This does not mean that the CPGB was somehow sui generis. Formed in 1920, the CPGB was based on the same highly centralised organisational principles as every other section of the Comintern. Nationally, the party’s King Street headquarters in London’s Covent Garden exercised immense formal authority, exactly as the Comintern’s Moscow apparatus did internationally. This apparatus of controls reached a peak during the sectarian ‘Third Period’, or Class Against Class (c.1928–34), when a stance of independent revolutionary leadership involved the attempted establishment of a separate communist subculture, sealed from contaminating influences by exacting party discipline and the sort of commitment to reeducation exemplified by the Lenin School.

Internationally, this period has figured prominently in discussions of ‘Stalinisation’, heavily influenced by the German case. If anything, this has been reinforced by the opening of the Moscow archives, which naturally are most abundant for the periods in which the Comintern’s interventions were most intensive. Nevertheless, in contrast to the German party (KPD), it was precisely in the Class Against Class period that the CPGB recruited fewest members and reached what, by most indicators, was its lowest point of influence between the wars. Despite the superficially favourable circumstances of mass unemployment and economic slump, in purely numerical terms the entire national party membership of 1930 may be compared with one of its second-rank districts at the time of the CPGB’s wartime membership peak. Albeit at a much higher membership level, the insulating tendencies of the Class Against Class period were then revived during the early Cold War, which marked the end of what we refer to here as the CPGB’s recruiting ‘heyday’ from the early 1930s to the mid-1940s. Crudely speaking, this intervening period was one of popular-front politics and an adaptation to the prevailing cultures of the left, including what, by communist criteria, was a relatively relaxed approach to recruitment and the oversight of members’ activities. This was symbolised by the party’s general secretary, the Lancashire boilermaker Harry Pollitt (1890–1960), a former shop steward and secretary in the 1920s of the trade union-orientated Minority Movement, whose labour-movement credentials and command of the vernacular made for a distinctly expansive conception of communist politics. Not least because the CPGB’s institutional presence was so much weaker than its counterparts in Weimar Germany or post-war France or Italy, the viability of communist politics in Britain depended as much on its interactions with the world beyond as on the bonding of the excluded. It was Pollitt’s great political strength that he recognised this.

Quite apart from these transnational distinctions, the succession of clearly delineated phases in these forms of interaction meant that the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of communist party membership was experienced in different circumstances by different generational layers, coexisting within the party where they provided another form of interaction. In a country like Britain, historians have become used to this idea of political identities as complex, shifting, often negotiable and not necessarily coterminous with a single institution. Perhaps in the most extreme human conditions claims of class, gender, nationality and generation can be imagined being set aside, as Samuel suggested. More routinely and systematically, communist parties with the power to do so sought to ‘transcend’ them by means of coercion. This, however, was patently not true of an organisation like the CPGB, and in establishing how the party functioned methods need to be avoided by which such elementary distinctions are obscured. Definitions of the ‘real’ communist tell us little if they generate circular lines of argument by which the ill-fitting is disregarded or automatically assigned a secondary significance. Notions of a rebirth, or of a Kriegel-like aspect to the outside world, need where appropriate to accommodate evidence of continuities or competing forms of association. Mentalities need to be recognised other than those defined by a single set of institutional boundaries, and the unifying codes of a ‘closed society’ also have to be reconciled with the ‘capillarity’ with the outside world which Kriegel acknowledged without actually exploring.

Rather than fashion a distinct set of parameters for the writing of communist history, we have therefore drawn upon insights and methodologies from a range of disciplinary contexts and subject areas. Although now rather dated, the strength of Kenneth Newton’s Sociology of British Communism (1969) was to demystify the CPGB by subjecting it to what were then standard procedures of sociological enquiry.
in its lines of enquiry, there is also a rich body of work on French (and Francophone) communism drawing on a wider tradition in political sociology and providing an important stimulus and point of comparison for our own work.\(^1\) At the same time, we have drawn from writings about popular politics and social movements in Britain an appreciation of issues of language and representation, of the significance of transitions and trajectories in the political life history, and of the need in complex societies for a multi-contextual approach to human relationships, focused on patterns of conflict and interaction at several levels. Moving between these different levels, we have kept in mind the idea of roles as well as contexts; that is, both the extent to which communists involved in multiple relationships and forms of association necessarily took on different roles, and how far these were successfully subordinated to, or conversely undermined, the unitary structures of democratic centralism. Famously in \(\text{Th}\ e\ M\ aking\ of\ the\ English\ Working\ Class\), Edward Thompson insisted that class was not a ‘thing’ but a relationship occurring historically.\(^2\) In this research, we have taken the same approach, not only to gender, generation and other social relationships, but to party membership itself, and have tried to convey not just the fluidity but the synchronicity and interdependence of these relationships. Party membership in our view is best thought of not as a ‘fusion’ but as what Pennetier and Pudal call a ‘complex transaction’, both between the party and the individual, and between international communism and the British left as mediated by these individuals. As such it provides a case study in both, each modified by the other.

Consequently, no claims are made here regarding either the typicality or the atypicality of the British case. Instead, as a contribution to a broader comparative framework we propose as a possible line of differentiation that suggested by the anthropologist Max Gluckman’s notion of multiplexity. Deriving from the study of tribal societies, and subsequently drawn upon by historians of community in industrial Britain, multiplexity refers to the extent to which a group of individuals is linked together in several different types of relationship, so that influences of kinship, neighbourhood, work and religious or political association tend to reinforce each other.\(^3\) Multiplexity therefore suggests cohesion and the aggregation of group loyalties into a single collectivity. In Craig Calhoun’s words, instead of the fragmentation of ‘discrete and wholly independent individuals’ with their ‘many separate social dramas’, it tends to give rise to ‘social persons subject to innumerable constraints on their individual autonomy’, while at the same time benefitting from powerful collective supports.\(^4\)

Though lacking the more draconian associations of the total institution, the congruence of such a concept with standard accounts of communist politics, particularly the notion of the communist counter-community, is apparent. More than that, used discriminately as a variable over time and place, multiplexity suggests the possibility of a genuine comparative typology of communist parties. At one extreme might be placed the ruling parties, whose domination of civil society forced a sort of multiplexity through the pervasive presence of the party and the obliteration of Dutt’s distinction between politics and life. Backed by the resources of state power, multiplex social relations were linked across the system by the vertical integration of the party-state and the denial of autonomous spaces, even, theoretically, at the level of the family. Without venturing into the battles of revisionist and post-revisionist historians of Soviet Russia, Stalinism can be seen in this comparative context as a coercive and systemic variation on multiplexity, legitimised or at least embellished by the spurious notion of a single overarching community interest.

In an intermediate position were parties enjoying mass support in conditions of legality like, for most of its existence, K riegel’s PCF. Lacking means of coercion, these larger parties nevertheless controlled extensive counter-communities comprising, inter alia, party sections, social movements, union confederations, recreational networks, newspapers, magazines and party businesses. Even kinship networks, and the ideal of the party family, served to reinforce these ties as often as they counterbalanced them, creating what K riegel called an ‘imperviousness to the other world’.\(^5\) Across extensive red belts or party heartlands, communist control of large swathes of local or regional government provided a further source of influence and patronage, notably in post-war France and Italy. In these extended counter-communities, the French and, quintessentially, the Italian parties (PCI) were ‘multiplex’ and deliberately so, for multiplexity was the associational counterpart to the PCI’s guiding strategic notion of hegemony. Organisationally, the links were buttressed in both cases by the thousands who were directly or indirectly dependent upon the party for their employment.\(^6\)

In Britain, too, the party had its ‘little Moscows’, in Fife, Stepney or the South Wales coalfield, though their very isolation could set local solidarities against the external imperatives of the party. More importantly, beyond these few exceptions the CPGB does not really fit the model at all. Heavily bureaucratised by conventional standards, it is true that a layer of party workers can be identified living their lives largely within the party. In London and perhaps Glasgow, there also existed the critical
mass to sustain a network of social and cultural institutions as well as a central party apparatus. As even a Fife communist could put it after a few days in London, it was worth the visit to dispel the feeling that one sometimes had at home—‘that the Party only exists in one’s imagination’.\textsuperscript{27} Even for those whose work, residence and main area of political activity linked them with non-communists, the moral imperatives of party commitment, for longer or shorter periods of their lives, could be consciously set above all other affiliations, precisely as Leninist precepts required. Nevertheless, for those outside of the nomenklatura, the party provided only one of a number of possible relationships, not always the most important of them, and it was abandoned by as much as a tenth of its current membership in almost every single year of its existence. Multiplexity, like the total institution, was effective to the extent that one was confined to the multiplex community. Despite the well-attested mortifications of leaving the party, the CPGB by this criterion was a veritable sieve.\textsuperscript{28}

This aspect of a continuous interaction between British communism and its host society has been recognised by every sensitive observer, whatever their political or intellectual perspective. Writing in the late 1950s, the American historian Neal Wood, no admirer of the communists, noted how the CPGB had ‘never become a closed society with distinctive mores isolated from the rest of society’, how its trade unionists readily fraternised with other trade unionists, and how for its intellectuals ‘bonds of family, school, university, profession, and club’ sometimes bridged the gaps that resulted from ideological differences. ‘British communists’, he summarised, ‘seem more moderate in their outlook, less engrossed with theoretical questions, and less hesitant to associate with non-communists than communists of other nations’.\textsuperscript{29} It was precisely thus that there arose the hoary old cliché, already familiar in the Comintern of the 1920s, of the especially marked disproportion between the CPGB’s diminutive size and its much wider political influence.\textsuperscript{30}

Such an interpretation runs counter to certain commonsense assumptions about the political left. Reflecting the generic traits of political sects, it might be imagined that the smaller the communist party, the weaker its appeal to ‘instrumental’ adherents and the greater its sense of enclosure and detachment from surrounding realities. Linked with a corresponding dependence on Moscow, this may be found exemplified by the later US communist party. Conversely, Eve Rosenhaft has argued that it ‘was in... Communist strongholds that it was possible to be Communist without following the Party line, precisely because being a Communist meant more than adopting the current policy as one’s own’. Applied by Rosenhaft to the red suburbs of Weimar Germany, where Geoff Eley has also argued that the party’s very size made discipline difficult to maintain, the same logic might explain the relative independent-mindedness of the Italian party within the world communist movement, or of a party stronghold like the Rhondda within the CPGB.\textsuperscript{31} On the other hand, Kriel’s PCF suggests a rather different pattern: that whereas in Paris the ‘communist social fabric’ was ‘rather strictly observed’, in many provincial sections, ‘where the local militants have to be treated with kid gloves because there are not too many to choose from’, a greater degree of autonomy existed.\textsuperscript{32} Kriel did not expect this to take the form of organised factionalism, which is rarely found either in Britain or in the French provinces. No doubt it is a misreading of the motivations of communist activists to expect that a sense of greater independence should necessarily take this form. Perhaps too it is the taking off of kid gloves that encourages factions to cohere. Regardless of the explanation, the CPGB, while never greatly prone to factionalism, was in this respect more like one of the PCF’s provincial sections than it was the formidable apparatus of Paris Rouge.

In producing such variations, there is more to multiplexity than membership density and the viability of communist subcultures. Just as critically, the formation of countervailing roles and relationships depended on the openness to communists of other forms of association: that is, the ability to find employment, pursue careers, avoid arrest and participate relatively unhindered in trade unions and other social movements beyond the party. Wood also observed that in Britain no great stigma attached to the Labour MP—or, be it said, most other types of ‘progressive’—who openly consorted with the communists, and that school or college loyalties could benefit even the communist who repudiated such marks of distinction.\textsuperscript{33} In the closing off of these other relationships, it may be that the parties of Weimar Germany and McCarthyite America, despite the disparities of size, had more in common with each other than they did with the CPGB.

This does not mean that British communists were not more subject to victimisation, prosecution and forms of social ostracism than almost any of their British contemporaries. The most recent academic study reminds us how unconstrained by legal principle the state was in its dealings with the early CPGB, adding that ‘nothing can begin to justify the relentless effort which was undertaken to suppress and crush what remained a relatively small political movement’.\textsuperscript{34} Even so, in an international perspective it is the relative mildness of such treatment which communists themselves privately cited in resisting the setting up of a
‘Red Aid’ organisation in the 1920s. Even incidents designed to isolate the party, like the banning of its newspaper or the imprisonment in 1925–6 of twelve of its leaders, immediately prompted protests from much wider constituencies. Bonds of social class, whether Oxbridge looking to its own or the industrial solidarities that helped ward off proscription in the early war years, both cushioned and fragmented the party by a process of acculturation. Perhaps there was even something of the ‘moral consensus’ which Thompson discerned in an earlier age of wars and revolutions, establishing limits beyond which the authorities could not step with impunity. Even the so-called Whitehall ‘purge’ of the McCarthy era meant principally blocked promotions or job transfers. Anything resembling a purge in the sense which historians of communism must ascribe the word was something outside of the experience of most British communists.

Organisationally and psychologically, the disciplines of the party itself were thus insensibly attenuated. ‘When all the world goes mad, one must accept madness as sanity, since sanity is, in the last analysis, nothing but the madness on which the whole world happens to agree.’ Thus Bernard Shaw during the First World War, and similar observations have often been made of the seeming irrationality of closed societies. To the extent that communist parties provided a simulacrum of a whole world, this was true of them too: hence the interdependence of counter-culture and the analogy with the total institution. Nevertheless, for reasons not of its own making, the CPGB for many of its members, though far from existing only in their imagination, did not amount to such a world.

Though he was hampered by lack of data, Newton’s underlying approach holds up well in the light of our own research. Instead of a totalitarian model of atomised individuals finding their sole means of social integration in the party, Newton discovered that communists tended to be more than usually integrated into a wide range of formal and informal relationships. Looking at longer-term trajectories, including those going beyond the period of party membership or the demise of the party itself, it is noticeable how often the record of activism continues even without the CPGB as one of its vehicles. Newton’s argument from such premises was that ‘radical movements operating in pluralist conditions seem to lean towards the political style of their pluralist milieu.’ This, however, does not quite capture the ambiguity of the phenomenon, for it was not so much pluralism to which the CPGB leant, but the complex interactions that pluralism represents. It is the continuous tension between these interactions, and the Bolshevik conception of a party hammered out of steel, that we hope in these chapters to succeed in conveying.

Albert Hawkins might have been described as a ‘typical’ CPGB foundation member. A BSP member since 1912, leading figure in the National Union of Ex-Servicemen, communist councillor in Edmonton and a ‘Lansbury’ by marriage—his wife was Nellie Lansbury, the King Street office manager—he represented several of the indigenous strands that went into the making of British communism. On the other hand, what Hawkins sought in communism was not the continuation of these home-spun traditions but their transcendence or even repudiation. Already in 1920, he called not just for solidarity but for total conformity with the Bolshevik model. ‘The Russian Party has achieved its present position... [as] a closely knit organisation, answering to suggestions and instructions from its centre in the same way that a complicated mass of machinery answers to the touch of a single lever’, he wrote in the Communist. ‘It is in this quality of discipline that the movement has shown itself deficient in the past; and only by acting with ‘a single mind and voice’ would Britain’s communists too ‘fit themselves for the task of guiding the unthinking masses’. Evidently the CPGB’s founders were not seduced by Bolshevism unaware of its authoritarian aspects. Ellen Wilkinson was a leading light of the students’ and guild socialist movements and a full-time organiser for the co-operative employees’ union, representing a different, though in its way no less typical, combination of influences. Nevertheless, she too held that the special strengths of the communist party were ‘discipline’, ‘obedience’ and a conscious rupture with past habits. ‘If we were going in for a revolutionary party’, she stated roundly at the party’s founding congress, ‘we must have a general staff and be willing to obey it’.Expressed with such clarity at the party’s origin, here were the features which have been held to distinguish this self-designated ‘party of a new type’. ‘Rigid’ discipline, unity in action, depreciation of the ‘masses’ and emulation of the Russians, all can be found dressed in military or
trajectories which this ever-changing aggregate, the party membership, explored, or at least conceptualised, in terms of the countless individual variations of communism according to time, place and social location and definition barely receiving consideration. And significance, countable in so many membership-units, with details of membership—and inferring a line of causation between them. Another a particular relationship—for example, that between party policy and awareness of a number of possible pitfalls. One is the danger of abstracting elsewhere. On the other hand, comparative historians also need to be effectiveness on a comparative basis, whether over time, in relation to membership figures provide crucial data with which to assess the CPGB's impact of the communists' anti-war policy of 1939–41. Clearly, numbers are relevant, and in the form of the proverbial party card, membership was identified as and with a thing. Nevertheless, approaching this 'thing' as the expression of a relationship, or set of relationships, allows a number of important and sometimes neglected distinctions to be made.

The first is that membership was just one of a number of possible relationships between the individual and the organisation, some of them also quantifiable, such as the reading of communist literature, support for communist candidates and campaigns, and financial contributions to the party. The second is that the character of membership itself varied according to period, national or regional forms of associational culture and the type of organisation involved. Juxtapositions of membership figures for different periods of party history or entirely different parties—for example, the Labour Party or communist parties elsewhere—cannot therefore be taken merely at face value. Thirdly, to return to the argument of multiplexity, party membership was just one of a number of possible relationships which individuals held concurrently and which inevitably impacted upon each other. Finally, and most obviously, the idea of a relationship implies two or more sides to that relationship and the need to understand the relationship in terms of both.

Membership figures do not simply indicate the willingness of potential recruits to join an organisation, but the expectations and definitions of membership held by the organisation itself, or its existing members. Although political parties are usually assessed according to inferred objectives of voter or membership maximisation, not all of them have prioritised numbers. To the extent that their expectations were determined by qualitative considerations, a merely statistical analysis of the results will be inadequate.

This is nowhere truer than in the case of communist parties. From the first Bolshevik purge of 1921 and the 'Lenin enrolment' three years later, to the similar relaxation of membership conditions which led to the virtual doubling in size of the French communist party in the 1970s, communist history shows innumerable instances of the valves of the machine being adjusted by the party itself. Even when pressures of credibility, competition and the need for resources produced 'normal' tendencies to membership maximisation, these remained counter-balanced by concerns with the quality and cohesion of party membership. Always
there was an element of what Sidney and Beatrice Webb identified as a ‘vocation of leadership’, by which membership carried expectations of conduct and proficiency, and demands of self-abnegation were rewarded, according to the circumstances, only by a sense of status, social purpose, moral rightness or power. Although not really touched upon in previous discussions of the CPGB’s membership, such a perspective can help us make sense of its aggregate membership figures before breaking these down in more nuanced ways.

Counting reds

The overall trajectory of party membership figures is familiar and is presented here as a graph.

There is no evidence that these figures were systematically falsified in any significant way. For outside audiences, initially including the Comintern, they were sometimes rounded up, or doubtful extrapolations made from branch returns. In periods of decline or stagnation, such as the early 1920s and during the Nazi-Soviet pact, figures might not be announced at all. Although audited accounts are available from the 1940s, following the membership haemorrhage of 1956–7 some districts inflated the figures on which they sent contributions to the party centre. They are subsequently said to have been discouraged from striking off members the moment they lapsed. Nevertheless, even massaged figures almost always represent real trends, and are not inherently more unreliable than those recorded by the Labour Party, the ILP or the CPGB’s own forerunner, the BSP. Moreover, the appetite for organisational data of both the party and Comintern means that the published information can often be checked against its original sources. By excluding dubious and uncorroborated figures, the graph provides what at first seems a perfectly legible guide to the party’s political fortunes.

But of course it is not. Even at a glance, the figures disclose the marked anomaly by which the period of the CPGB’s highest public profile, and certainly of its greatest historiographical visibility, overlaps only marginally with that of its greatest membership strength. Despite the party’s notoriety, it took it the entire inter-war period to attain a membership approaching 20,000, and for much of that period it could muster only a fraction of the membership it afterwards retained even into the ailing 1980s. Partly this suggests that the historiographical record may itself be misleading, and that its post-war presence has been relatively overlooked precisely because it worked in less demonstrative, or less ‘alien’ and sensational, ways. But what it also reveals is a basic redefinition of the terms of party membership, supplanting or surrounding the Bolshevik ideal of a cadre party with what, in character if not in scale, was described as a ‘mass party’ accommodating widely differing levels of activity and commitment.

As the graph shows, this transmutation can above all be identified with the years of the Anglo-Soviet alliance and the exploitation of the favourable recruitment opportunities it provided to maintain an expanded party apparatus in the absence of Comintern subsidies. However, though the wartime explosion of membership marked a turning point, the tension and, to some extent, oscillation between ‘mass’ and ‘cadre’ party conceptions can be traced in varying degrees in almost any period of the party’s history. Indeed, because not only the party but members themselves defined the terms of party membership, these different conceptions often coexisted, lingering on from earlier phases of its development, or previous political affiliations, or the conflicting pressures of party work. Moreover, the party as an organisation was in all periods torn between considerations of discipline and those of prestige and effectiveness. The issue of mass or cadre party thus offers at least as much of an explanation of the dramatic fluctuations in the CPGB’s pre-war membership as do the effects of different party lines, though the two should not necessarily be seen as alternatives. Rather, these different conceptions of party membership were themselves also an aspect of the changing party line, inextricably bound up with its other manifestations.

Though identified above all with the Comintern period, the cadre party conception was not simply imposed from Moscow. If the term itself was of external derivation, the sense of exclusiveness was not foreign to British communists, and was even regarded as one of the more intractable of the new party’s indigenous legacies. Already in 1921,
according to its South Wales organiser, CPGB branches were ‘inclined
to be too regimental on the question of admitting new members’. Two
years later his London counterpart also complained of branches’ readi-
ness to strike off members. Cumbersome forms of registration, train-
ing and even examination reinforced tendencies to exclusiveness alleged
to be more strongly marked in Britain than elsewhere. A 1927 report on
London branches by a Comintern worker commented on the restriction
of membership to ‘100% bolsheviks’ and readiness to ‘throw out’ inactive
members. ‘The fact that today the party members are overloaded
with so many tasks frightens many workers from the party’, he observed.

They say ‘Yes I work yet for the Party outside the party. If I am a
member then I am bound to give all my time, I must undertake all
functions…’ Here we must create another atmosphere, otherwise will very many good active workers (who in other lands as
100% communists are regarded) not enter the party.

As late as 1936, the veteran impossibilist Tom Bell grumbled that in a
small party branches were ‘only too glad to get people to join the
Party… on general broad declarations of adherence to Party principles’. For some party veterans, like the Moscow-trained Scottish organiser Bob McIlhone, the indiscriminate expansion of the war years only exacer-
bated such concerns.

Overlaying these generational differences, there were in every period
younger recruits in whom vanguardist conceptions, sometimes prefigured
by existing social, political or religious milieux, were stimulated by the
examples of Lenin, Stalin, shock brigaders and war heroes. Alfred
Sherman was the son of a Russian-born Hackney Labour councillor, who
as founder of the Centre for Policy Studies was one of the later architects
of Thatcherism. A Bolshevist enthusiast who had fought in Spain as a
teenerager and joined his initials with Lenin’s in the pen-name Avis—Alfred
Vladimir Ilyich Sherman—Sherman felt nothing but disgust at the party’s
wartime dilution. ‘It is taken for granted that the Communist is the
vanguard of the working class movement, that he is more active and
more ready to strike than the proletariat. I am bound to give all my
time, I must undertake all functions…’ Here we must create another
atmosphere, otherwise will very many good active workers (who in other lands as
100% communists are regarded) not enter the party.

Coinciding with the political stimulus of the 1926 miners’ lockout, the
opening of these doors led to something of a stampede. All coalfield
districts registered dramatic membership gains, and Tyneside leapt in a
year from having the smallest district membership to the largest—a figure
of 1,900. More remarkably, its peak reported membership that year was
3,600, including 2,600 supposedly consolidated into party locals, with
‘considerably more’ said to have filled out membership forms in tempo-
rary displays of enthusiasm. With new recruits outnumbering existing
members fifteen to one, and with forty-eight new party locals—previously
the district had only 123 members—Pollitt’s Workers’ Party had seemingly
come into being without the formality of a name-change. In mining
districts at least, little attempt was made to collect dues, and economic
conditions were such that many adhesions would not have withstood such
a test. Already in 1924, one of the largest party locals, covering South
West London, had noted that members recruited at public meetings were
‘by a large margin the least reliable and most ready to lapse’. It is there-
fore not surprising that the gains of 1926 proved equally short-lived. Arthur Horner’s claim that in South Wales the party’s real strength had
not changed ‘to the extent of 10 members’, must overstate the case: even
though the loss of victimised miners to other districts, later records from
Tyneside show more recruits surviving from 1926 than the previous five
years combined. Nevertheless, in many districts membership quickly
returned to pre-General Strike levels, suggesting that its underlying
stability was often greater than surface fluctuations might suggest. The
Scottish district, in contrast to Tyneside, had more than twice as many
members dating from the pre-1926 period than from 1926 itself, and in
the Fife pit village of Cowie the membership is said to have sunk back
almost immediately from a peak of ninety-eight to the six members it had before the lockout. In South Wales, several branches formed in the ‘stormy days of 1926’ never even met. Throughout the inter-war period this broad correlation was discernible between ‘mass’ and ‘cadre’ conceptions of the party and its levels of recruitment. That does not mean that this alone ‘explains’ the fluctuations in the party membership. Indeed, to the extent that ‘cadre’ conceptions tended to prevail in those periods of ‘isolation and radical externalisation’ which Annie K riegel identified with relative party failure, then political and organisational factors may be seen as reinforcing each other, whether in an upward or downward direction. Certainly, membership losses from the ‘new line’ adopted in 1928–9 were accentuated by the more stringent attitudes taken towards the registration and striking off of members in key districts like Sheffield and Glasgow. Sectarianism could also be manifested in a wariness towards untested recruits. As a recent local secretary of the Junior Imperial League, it is not surprising that Ernie Trory was questioned closely before being admitted to the party in Brighton in 1931. More suggestive of the period’s sectarianism, M arian Jessop encountered considerable resistance to her acceptance as a party member in Leeds, where, as the daughter of a prominent Labour councillor and herself a Labour defector, she was regarded as a possible infiltrator from the enemy camp.

Nevertheless, even during Class Against Class, T hird-Period fantasies of mass radicalisation bred countervailing impulses towards sweeping in the previously unorganised. T hese were most notably manifested in the unemployed crisis of 1931 when party membership is supposed to have trebled though with little discernible impact upon the state of party organisation. As well as oscillations over time between competing definitions of ‘the party’, the same differences were therefore manifested at any one time in different layers of activists, sometimes coinciding with distinctions of age or locality but never wholly reducible to them. In crude sociological terms, there was little to distinguish Sherman from the redoubtable J o e K r einste in, also young, also male, also Jewish and also from H ackney. N evertheless, at the very moment that Sherman was complaining of the party’s dilution, K r einste in was picking up the first of its ‘Tom Mann’ recruiting medals for having initiated a matchless Red Star Builders’ team, and himself recruited 196 new members in under three years. N o doubt this was only K r einste in’s way of also proving himself a commando of the working-class movement.

The Cold War

Despite the many overlapping and conflicting tendencies, the Second World War still remains a watershed. In contrast with the convulsive character of inter-war communist politics, notably as the product of Comintern interventions, the post-war decades saw the systematisation of a mass party model and general avoidance of more extreme forms of sectarianism. T he early Cold War years were something of an exception in both respects, while the general shedding of illusions about Soviet socialism made the C P GB’s continuing commitment to it appear even more of a distinctive attribute, only gradually attenuated over a period of decades. E ven so, in general terms the C P GB was now set on a more or less unbroken reorientation towards the norms of the British left, including a pragmatic and even laissez-faire view of its members’ responsibilities. M oral pressures to be active remained strong, but many party members did not actually accede to them and there is little evidence of them being struck off or disciplined as a consequence. W ith the diminished significance of wider impediments to recruitment, and the relative security against victimisation provided by full employment, the limits to the party’s growth were now basically set by the availability of new recruits and the willingness of members to recruit them.

A P a r ty N o t L i k e T h e O t h e r s? 19
ists J.B.S. Haldane and John Maynard Smith, this was the witless bullying of Soviet scientists during the Lysenko affair of 1948–9. For the former International Brigader George Leeson, a delegation to the USSR in 1952 sowed the seeds of doubt. However, both Smith and Leeson remained in the party until 1956, Smith in a purely passive way, ‘for old times’ sake’. Haldane too is said to have finally burnt his boats in 1956, after a ‘phased withdrawal’ lasting seven years.

In several cases, resignations are recorded for which the events of 1956 were said to provide merely the ‘excuse’, members having already dropped away or indicated longstanding differences with the party. ‘Been drifting for 3 or 4 years and as he says himself... his resignation is no loss in terms of work done for Party’, runs one of these assessments.35 A Manchester communist involved with re-registering members recalled that for every overtly political resignation several took the opportunity to terminate a relationship comprised of habit mixed with a sort of steady political immiseration, born of exhaustion with sustaining the party’s ‘times’ sake’. Haldane too is said to have finally burnt his boats in 1956, Smith in a purely passive way, ‘for old

Randall Swingler, like Collins a close friend of Gibb’s, began drinking heavily amid the disillusionments of the late 1940s and never again recaptured the comradeship and sense of mission of the anti-fascist movement. Despite enduring several years of frustration with King Street’s cultural directives, for Swingler, too, it nevertheless took the ‘trigger’ of 1956 to provoke his resignation.38

There was never again to be quite such a trigger for joining the party. A last flurry of recruitment occurred in the early 1960s, assisted by Labour’s abandonment of unilateralism and buoyant public notices of Sputnik-era Russia.39 Even into the 1970s, membership held up at levels otherwise unparalleled in the history of the extra-Labour left, and in Scotland had barely fallen back even as against the 1940s.40 Students in this period provided the fastest growing section of the party membership, peaking at nearly a thousand in 1973, and in absolute terms Geoff Andrews is probably right to describe the CPGB as ‘the main beneficiary of the 1968 student generation’.41 Nevertheless, the party’s ageing profile suggests that the longevity of its existing membership was more impressive than its attraction to new layers of activists. Even in relation to its size, the CPGB did not again experience youth recruitment on the sort of scale that elsewhere produced a temporary rejuvenation of the party’s ranks. By the late 1970s, at Italian or Dutch party congresses as many as two-thirds of delegates were under thirty-five and over half of the growing memberships of these parties were of the ‘post-1968’ generation.42 In Britain, too, the average age of the party executive fell from a peak of just over fifty in 1960 to forty-four in 1979, when a quarter of the executive were aged under forty. Nevertheless, even congress delegates, whom one may judge to have been among the party’s most active members, were predominantly over forty.

Not only levels of recruitment but the backgrounds and motivations of recruits gave the impression of a party reproducing itself more effectively than it connected with new constituencies. Though inter-generational influences had always played a major role in the making of British communists, from as early as the 1950s their significance began imperceptibly to change. While significant numbers of recruits had always come from radical or labour movement backgrounds, translating inherited values into the current political vocabulary of the communists, increasingly in the post-war years these broad continuities gave way to the institutional lineages of the ‘party family’. By the late 1970s, the editors of the CPGB weekly Comment and its monthly Marxism Today, the deputy editor of the Morning Star, the secretary and national organiser of the YCL, and the national communist student organiser, all had parents who were current or lapsed party members. Even twenty or thirty years earlier, student and YCL branches can be found substantially comprising such recruits, with the YCL itself in some localities providing an institutional expression of the party family in which ‘Party parents’ were enjoined to enrol their youngsters.43 Evidently the phenomenon of the ‘party parent’ goes some way to explain the recovery of recruitment in the years after 1956, with the coming of age of a CPGB baby boom generation, reflecting the bulge of young recruits in the 1930s and early 1940s. Even from a very early period, ‘party families’ had provided some 10–15 per cent of party recruits, but by the mid-1950s the figure was around a third, and this was maintained even during the expansion of 1958–64, when one might have expected the relative proportion of such recruits to have fallen.

One general survey of young political activists in this period identified
the principle of family succession’ as their clearest defining characteristic, with most respondents having an activist parent, two-thirds of whom supported the same party. While it would therefore be mistaken to exaggerate the CPGB’s distinctiveness in this respect, the motivations of the party’s later recruits do seem to confirm its declining appeal as an independent pole of attraction to British socialists. Though our own research on the later period is highly preliminary in nature, it is striking how relatively infrequently we have found the party’s current policies or perceived role in British politics referred to as a primary reason for joining. As in all periods, personal influences are often invoked, while particularly in the 1970s numbers of young Marxists were drawn to the party as a space for new ideas that was less ‘line-ist’ than the ultra-left and more political than the Labour Party. Beyond these issues, two positive attractions stand out: the party’s strong identification with communist aspirations and achievements internationally, and its historic capital in the form of struggles in harder and perhaps more alluring times, embodied in the life histories of older activists as well as the institutional persona of the party itself. According to one second-generation recruit, if the CPGB provided a ‘fruitful arena for politically homeless socialists to “squat” in’, it was because of its ‘relative strength, organisation and labour movement implantation’ and the fact that it remained the ‘only important left element internationally located’. Both were attributes shared by no other organisation. Both were contingent upon achievements in other times and places.

To suggest the continuing significance of international factors may seem surprising given the gradual weakening of the CPGB’s identification with international communism after 1956. It is true that the categories of national and international were once more stirred together in the composition of the British population itself, as the post-war years witnessed an inward migration from colonies and former colonies comparable with the influx of East European Jews which contributed so markedly to the CPGB’s formative generations. Significant numbers joined the CPGB—by the mid-1960s it had some 1,500 Greek Cypriot members alone—and although their integration into general party activities was limited, their presence did help reinforce a form of two-camps internationalism in which the CPGB figured as part of a global movement of struggle. ‘The world was still fairly easily divided into us and them, and it seemed to me that “us” were still preferable to “them”’, recalls David Aaronovitch, who joined in 1973. ‘Because on their side were the Pentagon, Franco, the Greek colonels, the people in the Deep South and the paratroopers from Bloody Sunday... On our side were M artin L uther K ing, or his successors, the forces in Vietnam, the democratic forces in Portugal and Spain.’

For student activists like Aaronovitch, this was reinforced by the involvement in student communist clubs of activists from countries still grappling with the legacies and realities of colonialism and political authoritarianism. Conversely, student communists might themselves take leading positions in organisations like Iraqi student societies because of their greater security from reprisals. Even so, the identification of an internationalist outlook with a more ‘ideological’ or ‘altruistic’ middle-class membership can no more be presumed upon than in the case of 1930s’ anti-fascism and the recruitment of the International Brigades. John Woodhams, a Maidstone railway goods porter, and M ike Jones, an electrical worker from Chester, were both recruits from 1965 drawn by the anti-imperialist struggle above all symbolised by the war in Vietnam. ‘It seemed to me that being in the YCL I was in the same great movement as the... fighters in Vietnam’, Woodhams recalled, while Jones also identified personally with a cause at once more compelling and—at least in terms of communism—more immediate than anything happening at home. In both cases, a sense of deflation was experienced on being introduced to more routine party activities, whether collecting members’ dues or being switched to trade union work. A ccording to Dou g Bain, at that time the Scottish YCL secretary, the YCL was always happiest with the ‘big international issues of the day’: ‘We actually weren’t all that interested in, or in touch with, youth.’

Offsetting qualities of ‘youth’, or contemporaneity, was the location of the sources of communist allegiance and identity in the past. Inevitably, wartime radicalisation continued to produce recruits after the conflict had finished, with the formalisation of membership after demobilisation or the forcing of the issue between communism and Labour by the Cold War. What suggests that these appeals were becoming somewhat fixed is the persistence of the same motifs into the 1950s and beyond. T hree of the M anchester interviewees whose membership happened to date from 1954 mentioned the impact of earlier experiences. T he oldest of them, John K ay, recalled the strong socialist atmosphere of his native Glasgow, where he had taken part in the YCL’s wartime activities without actually joining. E ven St Albans, where Sid Fogarty grew up, at this time seemed to be ‘alive with socialism’ with which the communists were largely identified. ‘I suppose’, he commented of his decision to join a decade later in Coventry, ‘meeting up with communists again just rekindled that stuff that I’d picked up in the ’45 period’. For Brian Blain, who was brought up in M anchester but joined the party as a teacher in Chester, not only the war years but the ‘fear of going back’ to the hard times between the wars exercised a formative influence that ‘resonated for many years after the war’.
These resonances were critical for Labour too; but in a period in which it began to appear counter-productive to urge younger voters to ‘Ask your dad’ about the depression, the communists’ association with an era which seemed to have passed was inevitably a wasting asset. The picture should not be overdrawn. Fogarty, for example, was strongly impelled by immediate issues, particularly that of peace, and this remained a significant factor contributing largely to the upsurge of recruitment which coincided with the first wave of CND from 1958.55 There is an obvious parallel in the delayed politicising effect which the First World War had had for the generation reaching adulthood in the early 1930s, often mediated in the form of writings like Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) or the activities of the League of Nations Union (LNU).56 Even so, images of war in a period of build-up to war had a different resonance from images of slump in an age of seeming affluence.57 As John Callaghan points out, the irony for the CPGB was that, with the return in the 1970s of economic depression and massive industrial unrest, the party itself was no longer in a position to reap the organisational benefits.

Communists’ formative readings tell the same story. In all periods, books survived their moment of origin on parents’ bookshelves or in libraries, and not only reprinted socialist classics but the humble literary relics of the Fabians or SDF continued to influence young minds into the 1930s and beyond. What was more distinctive in the 1960s and 1970s was that even contemporary influences were often historical in character. That again was true of writings like Remarque’s, but there are no works cited from the later period that compare with John Strachey’s *Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* or the other works of contemporary analysis recalled by recruits of the 1930s. Instead, communism represented an accretion of tradition and of historical reference points as much as a claim to the recruits of the 1930s.58 One of two such areas in the 1980s was Teesside, where the recovery of the party’s later years. The younger of them was Andy Croft, who had ties who had come to the party by the circuitous routes so characteristic of the party’s later years. The other was Eric Hobsbawm’s *Forward March of Labour*.59 He has also argued that in Britain, unlike Italy, there was no real point in joining the party after 1956.60 Hobsbawm himself has suggested that from his published work by this time it would have been difficult to discover that he was a party member.61 In 1989, the second-generation communist Sarah Benton wrote that the age of the party was over, and for this party at least this was literally true.62

Almost to the end, certain areas succeeded in bucking the trend, primarily reflecting the commitment of relatively small groups of activists. One of two such areas in the 1980s was Teesside, where the recovery of an effective communist presence owed much to two members in their thirties who had come to the party by the circuitous routes so characteristic of the party’s later years. The younger of them was Andy Croft, who had joined after falling ‘in love’ with the generation of the 1930s as an English literature student. ‘This is fantastic! Why isn’t this around any more? I wished I’d been around then’, he recalls of his decision to join. ‘It was through writing a PhD about novels written by Communist Party members fifty, sixty years ago.’ Stuart Hill, who worked closely with him, joined by what he called the ‘very strange process’ of being inspired by the Vietnam to speculate that ‘if there was a communist party, and it was a providing a good lead in Vietnam, there may well be an equivalent in this country’. Initially, Hill had some difficulty in locating this British equivalent, and when he got to attend his first YCL meeting—a talk on cised by reading about the Spanish Civil War, while Mike Jones devoured everything he could find on the Russian Revolution.

A broad brush treatment inevitably oversimplifies matters. It is clear, for example, that in the 1970s the newly translated works of Gramsci exercised a profoundly contemporary influence, particularly on communists in the universities. Nevertheless, whatever the permeative intellectual influence of Eurocommunism, its significance for party membership is more elusive. Despite the résumé of the Communist University of London and Marxism Today, these did not hugely assist in actual recruitment, as earlier analogues like the Left Book Club had, and a link between hegemonic strategy and the marginality of the party organisation was never satisfactorily established. All the Tom M ann badges were now stored away, as recruitment drives gave way to re-registration campaigns and even active communists might never think of trying to make a new member.63 If the communists’ most influential intervention of the 1970s was Eric Hobsbawm’s *Forward March of Labour*, this hardly seemed the contribution of a party purporting to hold the key to the future—though in a pessimistic, non-recruiting way it is the prescience of Hobsbawm’s analysis which remains impressive.64 Hobsbawm himself has suggested that from his published work by this time it would have been difficult to discover that he was a party member.65 It is the prescience of Hobsbawm’s analysis which remains impressive.66 Hobsbawm himself has suggested that from his published work by this time it would have been difficult to discover that he was a party member.64 In 1989, the second-generation communist Sarah Benton wrote that the age of the party was over, and for this party at least this was literally true.62

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surplus value by a sexagenarian district secretary who had attended the
Lenin School—the Tet offensive must have seemed a long, way away. ‘I
thought how boring—it was terribly boring—and anyway...what’s he
trying to tell me about, I’m studying at O level!’ Croft too had not come
across communists of his own generation, and was taken aback to find a
communist standing in the 1979 election: ‘I sort of imagined that it was
one of those things that was from the past.’

Both Croft and Hill were politicised by the issues of contemporary
Britain. Both signed up for a ‘new times’ agenda, and their party branch
in Middlesbrough practised an open, campaigning style of politics whose
proudest moment was opening up a debate around the politically taboo
Cleveland child abuse scandal of 1987–8. This was an episode in which
care professionals were subjected to attacks from all parts of the
political spectrum, and the Middlesbrough communists were themselves
the subject of a two-page exposé in the Daily Mail by the local Labour
M P. In areas in which a stifling and paternalistic Labour Party functioned
as an instrument of ‘social control’, there was therefore a role and a space
for the left, and the CPGB in theory was one of its potential vehicles.
Nevertheless, what drew Croft and Hill to the ever more distinctive step
of becoming communists were what both of them described as ‘heroic’
factors that in time or place were exogenous to the current British party.
Croft in a poem likened it to washing up after a party funeral, once again
‘as if for old times’ sake’.

The heyday of British communism

If the 1930s can be described as the ‘heyday of American communism’,
then a similar epithet, extended into the 1940s, could just as well be
applied to the CPGB. In Britain, it needed more than just a well-
adjusted response to local conditions to produce communists, and in the
1930s and 1940s communism seemed to provide this ‘more’ in the shape
of a compelling explanation of the ills of capitalism, a militant response
to fascism as the worst of these ills, and the example of an alternative
in the shape of the USSR. In Annette Rubinstein’s phrase, belief in Soviet
Russia ‘legitimised optimism’, and even for those not seduced by the
image, the dynamism and self-confidence of those who were was some-
times difficult to resist. Among the Manchester interviewees, three
O xbridge recruits of the early 1940s recalled how political reservations
or the attractions of other leftist currents were set aside in the sheer
momentum of wartime communist politics. ‘If you were going to be
politically active, who did you belong to?’, one of them asked. ‘It only
seemed to be the communists who were doing anything.’ Geoff
Hodgson, who joined a year or two earlier in Leeds, frankly regarded the
local ILP as more congenial: gentler, less abrasive, not so intolerant. ‘But
I decided on the Communist Party because it did seem more effective.’

Nevertheless, identifying this peak of recruitment is not sufficient to
explain the changing patterns of party membership, not just chronologi-
cally but socially and geographically. Although in a sense it is true, as
Andrew T horpe has shown, that the party was gradually broadening its
appeal across different social groupings, this was not a random perme-
ation of British society and resists satisfactory explanation at the level of
generalities. At a descriptive level, observations may be made of shifts in
recruitment from coal to engineering, from the old industrial Britain to
the south and midlands, and from male industrial workers to women and
middle-class adherents. In a spatial variant of the good years/lean years
approach, this may also be presented in terms of the fluctuating fortunes
of the districts themselves, and this again serves basic descriptive
purposes. On the other hand, there is a good deal more to be said regard-
ing the underlying processes involved.

Already it is universally understood that the CPGB did not recruit
youngerst in the 1930s and older people in the 1960s, but that the young
recruits of the 1930s had themselves aged in and with the party. O n
the other hand, the no less obvious point that they might also and simulta-
neously have changed jobs, homes, and even, in the crudest sense, social
class, has received far less consideration. Extending beyond the party
to its possible fields of recruitment, the sometimes missing context is that
of the tremendous social and demographic upheaval that occurred in
Britain during and between the two world wars, lingering on into the
upwardly mobile 1950s. Not only obviously volatile and temporary cate-
gories like the ‘youth’ or ‘unemployed’, but ‘mining’, ‘engineering’,
‘Lancashire’, ‘O xbridge’, even ‘Britain’, to say nothing of the party
itself, all comprised constantly changing populations that not only repro-
duced themselves but were constantly being reconstituted by active social
and political agency. If for simplicity’s sake they are often referred to as
locations or positions in particular fixed relations with each other, the
advantages of a prosopographical approach are to remind us of the
continual flux of movements through and between these positions. M ore
than that, the argument here combines a broad conception of mobility
with the idea of political space to suggest a definite correlation between
such movements and membership of the communist party.

In part it is a story of radical discontinuity. Stimulated by the work of
Stuart Macintyre, the idea of ‘little Moscows’ has loomed large in
perceptions of inter-war British communism, exactly as the inter-war years have loomed large in our general historical impressions of the CPGB. No doubt it is also true, as John Foster has argued, that the little M oscows were only ‘extreme examples’ of forms of activism to be found as a minority phenomenon in many other parts of industrial Britain. Nevertheless, whether defined spatially or socially, the CPGB’s inheritance in the shape of these enclaves of communist strength was, all things considered, entirely negligible. Though it largely incorporated the militant shop stewards’ networks of the First World War period, it did so at the moment of their disintegration. It drew on a student left radicalised by war and revolution, and consolidated part of it around the Labour Research Department and Dutt’s Labour Monthly. Nevertheless, communism was emphatically not the coming thing for the student rebels of the 1920s, whom the future Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell recalled as essentially self-absorbed and suspicious of ‘causes’. More generally, if one can even think in terms of a ‘split’ between communism and social democracy in Britain, then the CPGB ended up with the wrong end of the cracker. It did attract a significant section of the old activist left, heavily represented at its early congresses, though defecting in numbers during the Bolshevising 1920s. But with fewer than three thousand paying members by 1922, it inherited little in the way of political space from its predecessors, while being confronted for the first time by a Labour Party established on a nationwide, mass-membership basis. Accounts which present the CPGB as a wrenching off course of a vibrant pre-existing left are sociologically fantastical.

If the party nevertheless attained a presence greater than its predecessors, it was by penetrating and occasionally dominating some of those ‘new’ political spaces of the inter-war years in which the mainstream Labour movement had not yet entrenched itself. These spaces can be imagined in a number of different ways. Geographically, they existed in the new manufacturing areas of the English south and Midlands, and industrially in the struggles to build up almost from scratch trade union organisation in these areas. Occupationally, communist influence was felt in emerging white-collar or non-industrial unions such as the civil servants, scientific workers, building technicians, musicians and bank employees. The inter-war phenomenon of mass unemployment provided another sort of space, in which the communist-led National Unemployed Workers’ Movement (NUWM) not only secured widespread support in default of any credible alternative but provided one of the CPGB’s main recruiting forces in the ‘old’ industrial Britain. ‘We can enter the field of unemployment... because the Social Democrats are not in control there’, the NUWM organiser Wal Hannington put it in 1928. ‘We are fighting to wrest control from them in the trade unions, but in unemployment we can go in and find the masses ready to follow the lead of the Communist Party.’ Finally, the perennially renewed spaces of the youth and student movement were always susceptible to the most fashionable and dynamic creed of the moment, and if communism had barely registered in Gaitskell’s time, its influence in its ‘heyday’ was such as briefly to overcome the Labour Party proscriptions which were otherwise so far-reaching.

Though the correlations are persuasive, the concept of political space contains the danger of exaggerating environmental factors at the expense of agency. Spaces of themselves did not generate communists and, whether in the ascription of volitional attributes to party districts or the cruider mappings of membership figures onto social or occupational categories, simple lines of determination can be positively misleading. Even Newton’s ‘high and positive correlation between the number of unemployed and the total number of Communists’, though seemingly so well-grounded in images and preconceptions of ‘the slump’, is at variance with the achievement of a peak CPGB membership in a decade of full employment. Even had the correlation worked better, the intrinsic untypicality of the act of joining the communist party means that any such sweeping inferences are hazardous in the extreme. If it is untenable to claim that unemployed communists ‘joined the Party because they had lost their jobs’, or ‘forgot about the Party’ as they ‘found work again’, this is because in almost any conceivable social grouping, including the unemployed, the numbers joining the CPGB are so small that one is always looking for exceptional factors, or combinations of factors, to make sense of them. Sometimes, no doubt, communists and other political activists provide a ‘strong’ version of more generalised patterns of behaviour. Nevertheless, the possibility must also be allowed of shared experiences producing a range of reactions varying not just in degree but in basic character.

In isolating the exceptional cases of those who became communists, a prosopographical analysis reveals as a stronger correlate than any social or occupational category the relocation and redefinition of broader radical or socialist values acquired in work, family or community environments where these had already exercised a formative influence. Rather than the spontaneous generation of radicalism within penetrable political spaces, one typically finds evidence of a prior socialisation into the older cultures of the left, combined with a process of disassociation that was as likely to be social or geographical in character as political. Even the bare figures are suggestive of this phenomenon, though they under-
state its significance by excluding the ‘multiplier’ effect whereby the establishment of an effective party presence would itself then attract new recruits from environments hitherto untouched by communism or active socialist commitments. Although the evidence is not sufficient for systematic analysis, there are many examples which suggest that among the founding members of CPGB branches, the proportion of migrants from the old industrial Britain was considerably higher than among the membership as a whole. Exactly as in the Teesside area of the 1980s, highly motivated individuals played a key role in the establishment and maintenance of viable party cultures, and this was particularly true as these spread across the country in the 1930s and 1940s.

Conversely, examples are recorded in which a general attraction to communism did not immediately mean joining the party because it lacked a credible local presence, so that one might join a branch ‘as soon as I was at a place where there was one’. Already familiar from studies of earlier socialist activists, and in the context of the militant and moderate wings of the women’s suffrage movement, the significance of local factors in shaping political affiliations survived the seemingly more formalised divide between the Labour and communist parties. In certain periods it was even sanctioned and exploited by the CPGB itself. Hence a migrant like William Ross, a Lanarkshire mining recruit of 1926, was urged to work within the Labour Party he found established in Kettering, becoming a councillor and anti-war parliamentary candidate before resuming open communist party membership. Both in the gathering of momentum and its melting away, the gregarious nature of political commitment hence gave rise to a snowball effect which further complicates straightforward quantitative presentations. It might also help explain the extremely localised pattern of communist implantation: even in the stronghold of the Rhondda Fach, Mardy’s ‘little Moscow’ could be contrasted with the weakness of the party’s presence just a mile or two away. Similarly, the emergence of vigorous party branches in particular post-war new towns seems to have been due as much as anything to the early arrival of relatively small numbers of experienced activists. Most remarkably perhaps, when in 1945 the CPGB gained its highest ever vote in an English constituency in suburban Hornsey—previously enjoying the second largest Conservative majority in the country—this was grudgingly identified by King Street with a form of local ‘exceptionalism’ associated with the dominating personality of the candidate, G.J. Jones. An ILP member from the early 1920s, Jones’s defection with a group of ILPers in the mid-1930s marked the beginning of an effective communist presence which even the concentration of Highgate intellec-

Such an analysis suggests an important comparative context for our own research. In countries where genuine mass communist parties were established, areas of communist support have convincingly been correlated with older radical and socialist voting traditions: in the French case dating back into the nineteenth century; in Italy through the succession of the communist ‘world’ to the socialist world of the pre-fascist era; and in Germany through the appropriation of a number of former SPD strongholds as the communists’ share of a bitterly divided legacy. In these countries too, significant proportions of post-war communist recruits have been shown to have come from communist or other left-wing families. To this extent, the British case bears out the general picture. Indeed, in Britain such lineages were if anything even more significant, given the more ambiguous and negotiated character of the communists’ break with social democracy and the relative attenuation of the concept of ‘reformism’—so very much the defining other of French or German communism—due to a strong sense of attachment to a broader labour tradition.

On the other hand, the relative weakness of the CPGB’s distinctive identity was precisely one of the reasons it met with so little success in areas where it could only have developed effectively as an alternative to Labour. In one of the few cases where it did so, in Stepney, this has been ascribed to Labour’s increasing domination by an Irish Catholic caucus in a borough with a large and radicalised Jewish population: again a variation of the political space argument. Perhaps in the coalfields, the bitterness of disillusionment in traditional leaders also created the possibility of distinctive configurations. Nevertheless, generationally, geographically and even politically, the CPGB’s general implantation reveals elements of complementarity with the Labour tradition more marked than was necessarily the case in some other parts of Europe.

Footprints pointing one way

One of the less conventional aspects of such an analysis is the association of communist party recruitment with a concept of mobility. In an extensive sociological literature, mobility has typically been identified as upward mobility, described without reference to the historical events which may have promoted or necessitated upheaval, and divorced from any rigorous consideration of patterns of migration and social disturbance accompanying changes in status and remuneration. Within the prevailing class perspectives of the British sociological literature, mobility has also been
seen as hindering the development of class consciousness through the ‘marginalisation’ of class values. Implicitly, class in these analyses functions as a set of fixed positions, if not actual populations, with a rather abstract notion of movement as if from one container to another. More allusively, the idea of mobility has also figured prominently in discussions of American exceptionalism, through discourses of opportunity and the ‘missing frontier’, and a virtual ‘iron law of mobility’ has been depicted as inimical to the development of socialist politics.

On the other side of the coin, the emergence of socialism has often been associated with notions of community, or of counter-community. Hence David Howell has shown that the securest bases of the early ILP tended to be in relatively stable settings in which working-class activists might already have secured considerable levels of participation in voluntary organisations. Similarly, communist strongholds like the Rhondda tended to be characterised by a well-developed sense of community, as measured by involvement in the union, chapel and other forms of social organisation. Where changes of occupation and place of residence went together, as so often between the wars, these were seen by contrast as contributing to the ‘absence of local solidarity’ bedevilling labour organisation in Britain’s new industrial areas.

In Newton’s Sociology of British Communism, it was the occupational and geographical immobility of the engineering and particularly the mining industries which was seen as conducive to communist activism. Newton even described the radicalism of the South Wales coalfield as being ‘contained’ by the closing of the ‘escape routes’ of geographical mobility and vertical and horizontal social mobility.

The qualitative evidence we collected offers a rather different perspective on these questions. In so far as immobility is equated with the absence of opportunity, undoubtedly there is much to be said for the conventional view. In the standard post-war ‘meritocratic’ study, David Glass’s Social Mobility in Britain, mobility was described as diminishing the ‘personal frustration’ of the individual and engendering feelings of ‘social harmony’. It was this feeling of frustration that Newton apparently had in mind, and to the extent that working-class activism not only derived from a sense of blockage but provided a vehicle for talents which would otherwise have been frustrated, our own research provides some support for such a correlation. David Goldstein, a Middlesbrough YCLer of the 1930s, put it in copybook terms of an ‘economic brick wall’.

I don’t think I can describe the sense of frustration. In the YCL there were people who would have gone up to Oxford or Cambridge, very clever people, and... the parents thought it was marvellous if they got a clerking job in Dorman Long’s.

Several interviewees made similar observations, and from this aspect the vibrant social and cultural life of the 1930s’ YCL appears as an overflowing of interests and aptitudes uncatered for either within or beyond the workplace. Adding a further dimension to the sense of frustration, inequalities of gender within the family gave rise to their own distinct sense of injustice and confinement, and the clear and explicit preference given to the education of male siblings—who, if they got to grammar school, were three times as likely to attend a university as their sisters—was occasionally reflected in a later orientation towards women’s demands or activities within the communist party.

If our broader findings nevertheless cut across these paradigms in a number of ways, this is partly a matter of definition, for the concept of mobility is used here in a less restricted sense than has been conventionally been the case. Where traditionally sociologists focused on inter-generational mobility, typically judged by fixed reference points in male careers, a prosopographical approach allows us to trace the experience of mobility through individual life histories, relating it to the larger events and processes which were its concomitant and to some extent its begetter. Against one-dimensional indices of social class, this historicisation of the concept allows account to be made of migration, unsettlement, family break-up and the changing work processes or social relations which together comprised the subjective experience of mobility.

Like analyses of party membership conceived as an institutional attribute, the standard literature often describes and measures mobility as a property of a particular society, conceptualised as ‘exchange’ mobility over and above that occurring through changes in the nature of that society and offering little effective purchase on issues of political behaviour—particularly that of a radicalised minority. Against this ‘Nuffield’ paradigm, a prosopographical analysis permits a more dynamic view both of class and other social relationships, not, as Mike Savage has put it, as ‘macro-social constraints’, but ‘working biographically through the individual’.

Viewed from this perspective, the key reference point in explaining frustration at the restriction of life chances was not usually, at least for men, employment at the same or a similar occupation to one’s father. Particularly among engineers, there are surprisingly few references to such resentments: not just because these occupations provided a socialisation into rich collective occupational cultures, but because these in turn provided a variety of formal and informal leadership roles producing a
strong sense of personal worth and status, if not always remuneration. Miners were somewhat different: here the arduousness, risk, low wages and incidence of industrial disease can certainly be linked with expressions of hatred or entrapment.101 On the other hand, even in the coalfields there are just as many reference to young pit workers ‘hankering’ to begin work at the coalface, or of communist miners spurning pithead jobs to remain closer to their workmates.99 In engineering, which itself could be regarded as an escape route from the pit;102 the link between skill and self-worth was more consistently made. John M ason, a Mexborough shop steward imprisoned under wartime defence regulations, gave rise to a classic representation in the shape of a biographical pamphlet written by a fellow activist. Here Mason was also described in copybook terms as ‘a boy of uncommon intelligence’ prevented by family circumstances from becoming a solicitor. On the other hand, in contrast to his previous menial employments, his working-activism was itself presented as a form of self-development, ‘from the drudgery of his early years into a skilled craftsman and an energetic trade unionist’. At one with the workers and yet standing out amongst them, he was ‘a man who rose, by sheer ability, out of poverty, to become a leader of men, an organiser of the working class, incorruptible and steadfast, the antithesis of that other kind of trade union official who climbs on the backs of the workers to position and salary and then deserts them’.101

Savage’s rejection of the dichotomisation of solidaristic and individualistic values is again suggestive here, and the ‘rugged individualism’ he identifies with the skilled male worker was pre-eminently a quality of the communist industrial militant.102 Sometimes, with the transition to party or union officialdom, this was identified with the escape from the production line, but it was not necessarily dependent upon it. Indeed, such was the standing of the shopfloor militant that one could well believe those party functionaries who claimed that it was not just the inadequacy of the party wage that drew them back to industry in the post-war years.103 ‘And also, it was exciting’, recalled a younger lay activist in the post-war construction industry. ‘I he fact is, you never just woke up in the morning and thought, “I’m going to go in and be a French polisher.” You woke up and thought: what’s happening today? As a young man it was wonderful stuff, and when you read things now about it, what often doesn’t come across is that absolute excitement.’104

Beyond the ranks of the technically ‘immobile’, a subjective sense of entrapment is just as likely to be encountered in the burgeoning white-collar sector frequently taken as the yardstick and epitome of mobility. In part, this was because expectations as well as employments were mobile. As personal horizons were extended by rising standards of literacy and basic education, what the communist writer Randall Swingler called ‘the Pelican mind’ was outstripping the provision of careers requiring such a faculty, even despite the transition from shopfloor to office routines.105 Indeed, precisely because of these transitions, such employments not only provided their own potential for alienation and petty managerial oppression but a possible sense of dislocation from the individual and collective self-esteem of older work cultures. In an early post-war survey, the occupations most highly regarded were those of ‘professionals’ and ‘skilled, male, manual work’; those least regarded, clerks and managers.106 If that emerged from a general survey, how much truer must it have been of a movement according both the worker and intellectual a status denied the misprised bearer of that worst of communist epithets, the petty bourgeois. If, as Stuart M acintyre comments, the wellsprings of working-class autodidacticism were being diverted into the scholarship stream, talents denied either recognition or fulfilment continued to find a form of expression in political radicalism.107 Suggesting a rather different view of the nouvelle bourgeoisie, the Fabian nursery’s speaker at the 1936 YCL congress described the ‘middle-class’ afflication of ‘blind alley’ jobs that were mechanised, standardised, threatened by ‘badly paid young women’ and deprived of leadership, initiative or authority of any kind.108 Caught in the trap of limited social mobility, it is here that one finds as a characteristic type of the CPGB’s heyday the young white-collar worker of generally working-class parentage and upbringing.

Dave Marshall was a perfect example. One of the frustrated Middlesbrough YCLers mentioned by Goldstein, he was the son of a railwayman whose ambition was that his children should get an ‘indoor job with a pension’, though Marshall himself was set on going to university. The nearest he got was a part-time economics course in his thirties. Instead he obtained, not exactly a clerkship at Dorman Long’s, but something worse: a position at the local labour exchange. Hating the civil service, hating the Means Test, hating older colleagues as ‘absolute bastards’ towards the claimants, Marshall was wretched in his job, and at the age of twenty went as one of the earliest volunteers to Spain. Wounded in the defence of Madrid, he returned to the civil service—‘I couldn’t get out’—reading poetry and economics and having two of his plays performed by the Middlesbrough Unity Theatre. At the age of forty-four, he finally made the break, moving to London to work as a joiner for Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop.109

Such a career history is doubly suggestive: both of the subjective sense of blockage compatible with inter-generational ‘mobility’, and of
the over-representation among communists of those reacting against it. 

At a 1980s' reunion of the middlesbrough YCLers—which significantly enough took place in London—stories were exchanged of larger conceptions of self-improvement variously realised, as steelworks' owners, academics, a museum director, anything in fact but a clerk.\(^{110}\) If the combination of commercially successful careers and communist attachments was mainly confined to a section of Jewish party members, discontentment with office workplace cultures was more widely felt.\(^{111}\) Though the rhetoric of socialism itself confirmed the standing of workers by both hand and brain, it was never entirely comfortable with intermediary employment in which neither was properly exercised. 'We can be proud, above all, of the skill of our craftsmen, second to none throughout the world. We can use this skill without the bosses', ran a characteristic YCL proclamation of the 1950s, before ending limply with a call to those who till the land, hew the coal and 'push the pens'.\(^{112}\) The author Gerry Cohen was himself the son of a tailor and might have gone to university but for the outbreak of war. Instead he worked as a lower-tier civil servant before taking emergency teacher training and eventually spending some three decades as a full-time party organiser. Indeed, it was among these groups, rather than on the shopfloor, that the party tended to find its long-term post-war functionaries. Though sometimes described as a sort of 'promotion', in Britain by this time such positions were rarely thought of as an advancement from the world of industrial activism or trade union office. They did, however, provide a release from the modest, petty-bourgeois forms of self-improvement which were the communist's definition of a dead end. 'Only God knows what I might have become had I not found the party', recalled Stanley Forman, who ran the front organisation, Plato Films. 'I would have been a predictable, lower middle-class Jewish bloke, perhaps running a little department in Marks & Spencer...\(^{113}\) Hymie Frankel, another East End Jewish recruit who was active in the trade unions and wrote a book on A. N. Whitehead published in the USSR, pondered the same question. 'What would I have been without the Communist Party? A tupenny-ha'penny teacher somewhere.'\(^{114}\) One may note in passing that it was the rapid expansion of white-collar unionism—in Frankel's case of bank employees and professional scientists—that both provided these more satisfactory roles and must in part have been a beneficiary of the search for them.

If inter-generational 'mobility' was compatible with individual experiences of frustration, the 'escape routes' of social and geographical mobility did not just syphon off the potential for radicalism but also decanted it while providing new occasions for its crystallisation in the form of active political commitment. Such experiences were often formative, not only in leaps from one class category to another, but in cases of the sort of horizontal or inter-occupational mobility which in some accounts is virtually invisible. Moving within a wide range of regional and occupational cultures, to say nothing of their internal demarcations or the unsettlement of the process of movement itself, lived experiences were profoundly marked by forms of mobility that hardly register according to the smothering common denominator to which 'class' has sometimes been reduced. Without sharing his normative concerns with 'extremism', such an emphasis is in some ways closer to Seymour Martin Lipset's emphasis on the radicalising experience of mobility itself, detaching individuals from particular collectivities and hierarchies and producing uncertainties or inconsistencies of status potentially radicalising in themselves and calling for a form of resolution through the politicising experiences of conflict or negotiation.\(^{115}\) It also calls to mind E. P. Thompson's reminder of the 'great qualitative disturbance' in people's lives and expectations which, though obscured by superficial indices of material improvement, provided the context for the emergence of working-class politics in the early nineteenth century.\(^{116}\) Similarly, in his essay on generations, Karl Mannheim emphasised the formative significance of 'fresh contacts', whatever their diverse causes, in producing a 'visible and striking transformation of... consciousness... not merely in the content of experience, but in the individual's mental and spiritual adjustment to it'.\(^{117}\) Mannheim did not suggest that these need be adjustments of a radical character, except in a purely personal sense. Nevertheless, this, according to the circumstances, was obviously one of their possible forms.

Two further remarks may be made in the present context. The first is that the process of dislocation from traditional working-class milieux could give rise simultaneously to apparently contradictory phenomena such as the aspirational or déclassé worker and the communist party activist. Political 'space', in other words, could be filled—or left unfilled—in diverse but not always mutually exclusive ways, according to complex contingencies and social variables. The second point is that, while experiences of mobility and migration were significant, so too were the notions of community and organisation. Culturally embedded in the values of the labour movement, the CPGB was notably half-hearted about recruiting casualised or migratory sections of the workforce. Instead, the process of radicalisation may be identified either with the incorporation into settled work or associational cultures or, more distinctively, the attempt to recreate them. Hence the communists belong squarely with the 'earnest' or 'critical' minority which sociologists have
identified with the establishment of associational networks in the new estates and industries of mid-twentieth-century Britain, and in the older industrial communities from which many of their inhabitants were drawn.118 Through the dislocation of home and work environments, it was the reaffirmation of values of collective organisation, and hence to some extent of ‘community’ itself, which in these cases took the radical form of communist party membership.

To begin with the ‘old’ industrial Britain, it is apparent that even where communism enjoyed sympathy and a degree of support, the tenacity of pre-existing associational cultures meant that actual party membership did not necessarily seem a compelling option. ‘Communist Party is all right, but don’t ask me to join up’, was how David Proudfoot described the prevalent attitude in Fife in 1926; and although such sentiments were seemingly belied by that year’s massive membership expansion in the coalfields, we have seen that in many cases this was an essentially demonstrative gesture, akin to the substantial communist party membership.119 Moreover, although the coal industry provided the outstanding instance of a substantial communist presence being founded upon the rejection and partial supplantation of existing leaders, even in communist strongholds, particularly in South Wales, the union and not the party was often regarded as the main vehicle of political activism. In the well-known words of the R. hondoza militant and sometime NUM general secretary Will Paynter, the South Wales coalfield activist was a miner and trade unionist first, a communist only second.120

More generally, there were complaints of the ‘poor social composition’ of communist party members in the established labour movement areas on which it had concentrated in the 1920s. In the Cumberland coal districts, for example, the mining membership fell away rapidly after 1926 leaving branches ‘isolated from the mass of the workers’ and afflicted by ‘a certain disreputable personnel’.121 On Tyneside by 1930, the party was described by its organiser as comprising ‘a decidedly disproportionate number of 100 per cent bums and stiffs’.122 In North Staffordshire, the party also failed to attract the ‘good Trade Unionist Pit Worker’, effectively establishing an ‘unemployed Branch’ again associated with ‘unreliability’.123 The West Riding too was described in 1925 as ‘a very poor district indeed’, while in the textile districts of North East Lancashire M argaret M cCarthy recalled that the party’s personnel was of the ‘poorest possible calibre, mainly unemployed and sometimes unemployable, lacking… character, ability and even intelligence’.124 She also claimed that many of these members defected to M osley, a possibly apocryphal statement which certainly cannot be linked with any significant crossover between communism and fascism such as Conan Fischer has claimed to have identified in Germany.125 On the other hand, Stuart R awnsley has shown that the BUF did make recruits among the less well-organised workers of the cotton districts, and the social composition of the two parties at this time does appear not to have been all that dissimilar.126 Moreover, of the four individuals we have located as having defected from the CPGB to the fascists, three were from South Wales, including two unemployed activists who went over to M osley after serving prison sentences for incitement to mutiny.127 It may be noted that even in South Wales, the party membership in 1932 was characterised as bitterly divided on personal matters and containing a large percentage of ‘demoralized hangers on who have utilize[d] their membership in the party to embezzle money, etc’.128

It is therefore plausible that the CPGB in these areas did not at this time attract what M cCarthy called ‘good types’, and that even those who were attracted did not necessarily join the party. In the cotton-weaving town of N elson, Selina Cooper was a veteran socialist and suffragist who associated with the communists, but did not join their ranks even after being expelled from the Labour Party for supporting the communist-sponsored People’s Convention in 1940–1. M ore strikingly, nor did her daughter M ary Cooper, though by age, family background and even political outlook she was not easily to be distinguished from many communist party recruits—except perhaps by remaining in N elson. ‘I will join the Communist Party, but I will not leave loose of this strength’, she would say, meaning by this the strength of the established labour movement.129

The argument must have had considerable cogency for those whose left-wing or pro-Soviet attitudes were accommodated within the Labour Party. When in 1927 Britain provided the second largest delegation to the Bolsheviks’ tenth-anniversary celebrations in Moscow, Labour and trade union figures far outnumbered the communists and the great majority came from the older industrial districts.130 Similarly, among those like Cooper, expelled or threatened with expulsion from the Labour Party as supporters of the People’s Convention, the older industrial districts again figure prominently.131 At least one of these expellees had even been on the Russian delegation fourteen years earlier. T his was H arry Bolton of Chopwell, County Durham: a coal miner, Labour councillor and chairman of Blaydon UDC, who during the General Strike served a two-month prison sentence along with the head of the 1927 Russian delegation, future M ineworkers’ president, W ill L awther. An ‘ardent M ethodist local preacher’, Bolton, like Cooper, appears never to have joined the CPGB.132 It may be noted that Chopwell, though briefly
famous as the ‘reddest village in England’ bearing Lenin’s image on its miners’ banner, had no more than three CPGB members in 1930.133

The labour movement’s strength was less impressive in other parts of the country only just beginning to experience intensive economic development. Until the strategic dispersals of the war years provided a temporary countervailing movement, the whole period of the CPGB’s existence was one of a relentless pull of some hundreds of thousands of migrants from north and west Britain—from coal, steel and cotton—to the south and east. In the words of one migrant, the communist and pioneering oral historian George Ewart Evans, the road out of Wales was like the path to the lion’s cave—‘the footprints all pointing one way’.134 If membership stagnated in many of the party’s earliest strongholds, notably Evans’s own South Wales, this did not so much represent the political shortcomings alleged by the party leadership as the ebulitus of literally tens of thousands of those of their inhabitants most likely to join the party.

The aggregate figures are stark enough: the loss of a sixth of the Welsh population by migration between the wars; of a million or so Scots over the course of the century, and 129,000 from Durham in just five years, 1926–31. Broken down by age group the figures are more eloquent still, because inevitably it was the young—the age group providing the majority of communist party recruits—who made up most of the migrants. In the Rhondda in the 1920s, while the ‘industrial old age group’ (45–59 years old) lost 12 per cent by migration, and the ‘middle age group’ (30–44) 18 per cent, the ‘young age group’ (15–29) was depleted by a third in this one decade alone.135 If deep-seated industrial traditions offer one explanation of why the callow excesses of the Third Period had such a lukewarm reception here, another was the removal by migration of the ‘Leninist generation’ that was most strongly enthused by them. Even Garfield Williams, Bedwas miner, central committee member and fervent advocate of Arthur Horner’s expulsion from the party, is last to be traced as a farmer in Stanmore.136 Dai Lloyd Davies, one of the ‘middle age group’, spent the 1930s running a London dairy.137 In Scotland, where migration was less widespread than in Wales and more often of an intra-regional character, a tenth of the members recorded in 1928 were said to have ‘emigrated from the coalfields in which they have been victimised and... not yet resumed Party activity’.138

But stagnation in areas like the Rhondda was compensated for by the buoyancy of the migrants’ reception areas. Even over short distances the migrant acted as a catalyst. George Short, one of the CPGB’s short-lived 1926 enrolment in Chopwell, was one of the Durham miners who took up work at the expanding ICI plant at Billingham, becoming the founding father of Teesside communism and the party’s district organiser until as late as the 1960s.139 In West Wales, if the Welsh-speaking mining village of Onllwyn was itself something of a red village, said to have contributed more on behalf of Spain (including two International Brigaders) than any other community of its size in Britain, this was due according to the local Spanish Aid organiser to the arrival of unemployed miners from other parts of the coalfield in the 1920s.140

Even within the coalfields, despite what for many was a bitter disillusionment in ‘reformist’ leadership, migrants seem to have been least likely to have adopted communist allegiances where mainstream labour organisations were well established. In the year of the General Strike, the Yorkshire coalfield organiser of the Minority Movement commented that even ‘class-conscious’ migrants to the area from Durham and South Wales were ‘suffering from the little better conditions they obtain here... and are therefore not very anxious that any change should take place’.141 Over the border in Nottinghamshire, on the other hand, when in 1936–7 the battle took place for independent trade unionism against the ersatz ‘Spencer’ union, this focused on the Harworth colliery with its workforce drawn predominantly from the northern counties. There, during the communist-led strike, the miners ‘would talk of the struggles of their native Durham and Northumberland, and the part their forbears played in the building of the miners’ organisation’.142 In Yorkshire too, Scottish migrants did later help inject a note of militancy into the coalfield, but it seems that they did not generally feel impelled to join the local communist party: unless, like Scotsman Mick Kane, the leader of the Harworth dispute, they had done so before moving south.143 Conversely, migrants to the newest British coalfield in Kent did form active party branches, and in this extraterritorial enclave of industrial Britain even secured the election of a communist councillor.

In its combination of occupational continuity with dramatically new location, Kent was somewhat distinctive. Even among the migrants from the older engineering centres, skilled engineers tended to gravitate towards existing centres of the industry such as the West Midlands.144 In these cases, and notably in Coventry, we shall see that this gave rise to a decidedly ‘syndicalist’ variant of communism rooted in the factory. On the other hand, areas where migration led to viable communist parties competing in the political sphere tended to be the ‘new’ industrial areas of light engineering and manufacturing, which Pollitt described as ‘uprooted from the tradition of the Labour and Trade Union Movement’.145 Already in the Class Against Class period, membership...
was holding up better in the London district—then comprising most of southern England—than almost anywhere else. By 1937 the district was being commended as an exemplar of the ‘new popular party of the workers’, compared with the ‘sectarian rut’ into which the communists in the old industrial districts had fallen. A sevenfold increase of members meant that by this time the district provided over 40 per cent of the party’s total membership, compared with 15 per cent in 1927, and new party districts were created in Kent, Sussex and the South and South East Midlands. Similarly, while the London YCL membership was over two thousand the combined total in the Lancashire and Yorkshire textile districts and the South Wales coalfield was thirty-four. In towns like Luton and Slough, the party’s development can be linked directly with incoming activists like the Scotsman Jimmy K incaid and South Walian G wilym Evans. Bill Hall was a former ILPer and CPGB branch secretary in the pit village of Birtley, near Newcastle, which disintegrated after 1926 when all but one of its dozen members left the area. In Dagenham, on the other hand, where Hall became the party secretary in 1929, the local communists were recalled as mainly comprising ‘foreigners’ to the South East. Similar remarks were made regarding many localities, like the working-class estates around St Albans locally referred to as a sort of ‘red belt’ and containing almost nobody whose family went back there more than a generation.

Probably the best researched of these communities is Oxford, which between the wars was a site of expanding car production in which incoming South Walians provided a catalyst for the development of industrial militancy and a thriving communist party. Drawing upon the researches of Richard Whiting and A. J. Chandler, a number of observations may be made regarding this phenomenon. The first is that, despite the images of what Gwyn Thomas called ‘a Black Death on wheels’, the migrants were not by and large desperate or destitute, driven out by personal black-listing, he came to London around 1931, became active in Busmen’s Rank-and-File Movement, briefly edited The Busman’s Punch and joined the CPGB in 1933. As subsequent London organiser of the Association of Scientific Workers and national organiser of the Association of Building Technicians, Williams also illustrates perfectly how old industrial skills were applied to the emerging structures of white-collar unionism. In other cases, lineages were inter-generational, drawing on childhood or inherited impressions rather than direct personal involvement. Norman Brown was a Pressed Steel shop steward whose father read the communist press and who recalled the 1921 and 1926 miners’ strikes as he grew up in Wigan, while as late as 1950, Kevin
alpin, one of the CPGB’s leading industrial activists of the 1970s, cited family experiences in inter-war Preston as one of the causes of his joining the party in Dagenham.159

Through overlapping memberships of the communist party, union branches, trades council and city Labour Party, communists in Oxford established a presence within the labour movement which was far more difficult to achieve within the settled alignments of the older industrial areas. ‘[L]et him remember that the Pressed Steel branch of the TGWU was built up by the united forces of the workers’, local activists reminded one incoming union officer, and the plausibility of this claim meant that a tolerance was extended to the communists which was by no means universal.160 In Oxford, it appears that officers of all the main labour organisations were at some time communists, and that covert membership of the Labour Party was so general and ill-concealed as scarcely to be undercover at all. In some at least of the virgin territories of the 1930s and 1940s, the challenge of new working environments, housing conditions and community issues gave rise to collective responses in which communists were actively involved from the start.

Occasionally one finds several of these features combined in a life-history as if to provide a real-life ideal type. Fred Westacott and Tom Mitchell, afterwards the CPGB’s district secretaries in the East and South East Midlands respectively, are two such cases. Mitchell, slightly the older by a year, was born in Sunderland in 1915 into a respectable if impoverished household and introduced to the labour movement when he began work in a local foundry at the age of fourteen.161 Having served his time as a moulder, he was sacked at the age of twenty-one and found another job in Letchworth through union connections. It was here that he became a communist. Already in Sunderland he had begun attending Labour Party meetings on his father’s membership card and, although a teacher in a local Sunday school, had helped stage the anti-war play Gas for a rally with former Communist MP Saklatvala. ‘If Saklatvala had asked me to go out on the streets in a demonstration or a fight, I’d have followed him that night’, he recalled, but was less impressed by the local party stalwarts. Glimpsing them in the NUWM rooms, ‘unshaven…[and] lying about’, Mitchell was held back from entering by his own sense of respectability. Nevertheless, it was with these images and ideas ‘piling up’ within him that in Letchworth he was introduced by another foundry worker to the newly formed communist party branch. Like ‘a totally new world’, this consisted of a ‘very respectable type of people…all wearing grey suits, nice and smart and happy with their children, the men wheeling the prams, not like up North’. Joining them, Mitchell also became the secretary of Letchworth Labour Party despite his unconcealed communist affiliations. If his break with home and Sunday School must have facilitated these commitments, perhaps the party provided a surrogate for such forms of association as well as an alternative. It is suggestive of the significance of mobility and political space that Mitchell’s brother, remaining in Sunderland, does not appear to have joined the communists, but was a longstanding secretary of the local trades council.

Growing up in Tredegar, Fred Westacott was not so much put off by the local communists as held fast by the Labour Party and its charismatic MP Aneurin Bevan.162 Though his father, a bricklayer, was a local union officer, Westacott’s memoirs stress the politicising effects of the wider community in which he grew up, epitomised by the experience of the 1926 miners’ lockout. In due course, he helped form a junior section of the Socialist League, later a branch of the Labour League of Youth (LLY), which met in a room bedecked with Soviet posters and Lenin himself exhorting them to ‘electricify’. The absence of any organised communist presence in Tredegar was attributed by Westacott to the local Labour Party’s ‘left-wing character’, and when a group of the youngsters decided on forming a CPGB branch they were talked out of it by Bevan on practical grounds. Though the following year a branch was established, its teenage secretary, a prize-winner at the county grammar school, shortly afterwards found work in London and in 1943 became the full-time communist party organiser for Hampshire and Dorset.163

Ironically, one of his key industrial cadres was Westacott. Having left Tredegar in 1936 after rejecting a place at Coleg Harlech involving further dependency on his parents, Westacott found work as a trainee fitter at Hawker Siddeley, Hamble, near Winchester. There he joined both the Labour and communist parties on grounds of expediency and effectiveness in a predominantly Conservative area. Here the Labour Party itself was a sort of political space, and yet the notion of an empty space needs strongly qualifying, for it is clear that national political alignments were seen as foreclosing the possibility of alternatives to Labour even where no local organisational presence had been established. Ironically, communists themselves played no small part in building up the organisations that might in conventional terms be regarded as their rivals.

Once the significance of mobility is allowed, it helps explain not only the geographical and occupational distribution of the CPGB’s membership but its evolution over time. Correlations do not imply causation, and mobility of itself could do no more than create favourable conditions for party recruitment. Even so, in contrast with the palpable inadequacy of
the link with unemployment figures, at least a correlation can be established between the party’s peak recruitment and the social convulsions of a total war, to say nothing of the space provided by the electoral truce. This analysis is consistent with the weighting of wartime recruitment towards groups mobilised into the war effort, often on active service or in new industrial locations. ‘Only by working in a factory—and perhaps not to the same extent even then—could I have received the practical class lessons which I received by working, eating and sleeping—as well as the constant discussions with—my comrades in the boiler room and of the dockyard’, wrote one middle-class sympathiser who joined under the impact of such experiences.164 ‘I always thought I was a Communist although not in the Party’, wrote another, influenced in this instance by family experiences of unemployment, but again only joining the CPGB on meeting party members in the army.165

In relation to the ‘factory’, this would help explain how party branches sprouted up almost overnight in towns like Gloucester and Cheltenham, and how in the first quarter of 1942 Bedford shot past Newcastle, Sheffield and Bradford as centre of the party’s sixth largest district.166 Subsequently the CPGB’s Midlands district secretary was to emphasise the role in this expansion played by ‘transfer of labour and evacuation [which] sent many capable cadres into new factories and new towns where they were able to recruit and rapidly build new branches’.167 Even in a city like Manchester, the most spectacular expansion took place at the Fairey Aviation works at Heaton Chapel, where most of the workers were new and effective communist party leadership was provided by two veteran activists going into the industry, David Ainley and Mick Jenkins.168 Three Fairey’s recruits are noted on the Manchester database, all women shop stewards, two of whom had previously joined the Labour Party or ILP, through the influence of a father and elder brother respectively.169 Such an analysis jars a little with recent emphasises on the apathy resulting from wartime dislocation, and it is noticeable that such accounts do not address such obvious signs of radicalisation as the growing appeal of communism represented.170 It is also true that tendencies to radicalism and fatalism not only coexisted but sometimes arose from the same causes. It is only the sequel of Labour victories in 1945, precisely in places such as St Albans, that suggests that in this period there was a definite shift towards more radical outcomes.

Perhaps the war years show how the concept of political space needs to be located in time as well as geographically. As well as the more usual pattern of party recruitment in youth or early adulthood, one finds in this period the more distinctive phenomenon of what may, in a strictly metaphorical sense, be called ‘delayed’ recruitment. For some older industrial activists, this ‘delay’ can no doubt be explained by increased wartime enthusiasm for communism and the opportunity to recruit openly in the factories. In other cases, there seems to have been a definite link with the move to new environments. Bill Carr was impressed by the communists he encountered growing up in a Northumberland pit village, but did not join them because of unspecified ‘domestic circumstances’. Subsequently joining the Labour Party, it was only during the war that he encountered a group of longstanding communists in the RAF and determined to join the CPGB on his demobilisation, at the age of thirty-eight.171 Bill Adams, a sheet-metal worker from Dumfries, recalled the ‘terrific impression’ a marxist lecturer had made upon him as early as 1920, and yet it was only in 1942, at the age of forty, that he joined the party in one of the Gloucester aircraft factories172 Betty Harrison, from the labour movement stronghold of Bradford, was another ‘good type’, coming from a socialist family and having been arrested during the 1930 woollen strikes. Nevertheless, she too appears not to have joined the CPGB until the comparatively late age of thirty-seven in 1941, having moved to London to work for the left-wing Fire Brigades’ Union.173 Much younger than any of these, Jim Mortimer was also from Bradford, where he was introduced to socialism through his father’s pamphlets and the labour college courses to which an uncle introduced him. Initially moving with his family to Portsmouth, he joined the Socialist League and LLY, and it was only as a London engineering apprentice that he at last threw in his lot with the communists in 1941.174 Though the number are unquantifiable, in the teeming industrial settlements of Coventry or North West London there must have been hundreds of such cases, as single factories attracted memberships which a decade earlier whole districts like Tyneside could barely match. In Hendon at its wartime peak there was a full-time branch party secretary, and in one London aircraft factory, there were said to be 229 communist party members out of a workforce of only four thousand.175 The irony was that a good few of the new recruits actually came from places like Tyneside.

Mobility in Britain did not come to a halt in the 1940s, and even into the 1950s localised variants of earlier recruitment patterns may still be traced. In Crawley new town, an active communist party branch was founded by a Sunderland bricklayer, Ted Rogers, and although by definition it was composed of migrants, it is interesting that most of the members appear to have commenced or recommenced their party activities in Crawley itself. Moreover, at least a half of the ten cases of which we have details did so in their forties compared with less than one fifth of party recruits as a whole. Those included a member who had joined
and left already in the 1930s, a married couple who had led an almost covert existence as party members in Leeds, and a longstanding activist in the communist-dominated Electrical Trades Union. Nevertheless, the establishment of effective new branches was by this time the exception, not the rule. Partly this may be linked with the extension of a viable Labour presence across the country. Another factor was the partial displacement of work and neighbourhood solidarities, in which so much of the party’s campaigning identity was invested, with what sociologists designated ‘interest’ or ‘interaction’ communities, dislocated from any close-knit spatial environment. At the same time, the political ‘pull’ factor exercised by communism in its heyday was much diminished: if there were spaces to be filled, there was no reason to assume that communists would necessarily fill them. Mobility of itself had never produced party members, and as far as the CPGB was concerned, post-war mobility, whether residential, educational or occupational, came to acquire more conventional associations with the dislocation of existing allegiances and membership decline. Propelled by some of the same forces, the impression once again is of a machine going into reverse.

Though casual comparison is potentially treacherous, one or two pointers may help to clarify the specificities of the British case. In Britain, unlike pre-revolutionary Russia, post-war Italy or even the formative years of the South Wales coalfield, economic migrants were often already socialised into working-class life and exhibited a strong continuity with the established cultural and institutional practices of the labour movement. In this respect, a closer parallel might be with the Paris Red Belt, in which strong symbolic continuities with the socialist tradition were accompanied by a respect, a closer parallel might be with the Paris Red Belt, in which strong cultural and institutional practices of the labour movement. In this respect, a closer parallel might be with the Paris Red Belt, in which strong symbolic continuities with the socialist tradition were accompanied by a relatively pragmatic and effective form of communist politics even during the Class Against Class period. Divergences from the patterns described here can be just as illuminating. In contrast with the British case, Studer’s study of Swiss communism reveals a party cadre characterised not by mobility but geographical ‘sedentariness’. Nevertheless, to the extent that this was attributable to the relative localism and geographical immobility of Swiss society, the apparent contradiction only confirms the general picture, for in contrast to the CPGB the Swiss party failed to renew itself between the wars, and its membership declined from a figure double the CPGB’s in the early 1920s to a twentieth of the corresponding figure in 1939. That Studer also points out the significance of geographical mobility in the formation of Swiss communists only seems to confirm such an interpretation. Though rigorous comparative work is needed to establish the impact of other variables on party membership, superficial correlations are already suggestive.

Continuity narratives

Another way of approaching these questions is to examine the ways in which British communists constructed their own life-histories. In respect of other European communist parties, and to a lesser degree in discussions of British labour autobiography, the centrality to such narratives of themes of rebirth or conversion has been strongly emphasised. Combining the notions of a newly acquired system of values and of a distinct, transformative moment of personal awakening, these conversion narratives are well-known to historians of radical movements and it would be surprising if the CPGB did not provide its quota. Nevertheless, this was not the only way of becoming a communist, nor necessarily the commonest one. Registering the specificities of such narratives, their variegated patterns of ‘before and after’ show that, even in respect of the myths it lived by, British communism defies reduction to any single dominant motif.

We can start with the idea of conversion in the broader literature of the British left. If conversion was a type of journey or transition, then the likelihood of such a journey being undertaken is likely to have varied depending on the individual’s point of origin and the changing character of the destination. In terms of when it occurred, the earlier the transition, and the more marginal the destination of socialism itself, the more its espousal seems to have involved some marked discontinuity: hence the famous conversion narratives of the late 1880s and 1890s, such as those of Beatrice Webb and Katherina Bruce Gaser. These were often middle-class converts, whose cathartic transition to socialism was likened by another of them, William Morris, to the crossing of a ‘river of fire’. Even into the 1940s and beyond, a well-adjusted social democrat like Anthony Crosland could still describe the attraction of socialism as ‘the emotional need for a God, a religion... for something to believe in transcending the individual’. On the other hand, even plebeian activists who were conversant with this vocabulary did not necessarily emphasise the connotations of otherness and deliverance with which we tend to associate it. Philip Snowden, proverbially the epitome of Labour’s nonconformist appeal, specifically disavowed the language of conversion in describing his own attachment to socialism. Others, while using the language, might do so colloquially, not to express their being lifted out of their society, but as developing and articulating its higher instincts—as Snowden put it, expounding as socialists ideals and aims which they already held ‘in a vague and indefinite form’. In any case, whatever their significance at the time of the so-called ‘religion of socialism’, a century of constantly
readjusted expectations of Labour and diminishing familiarity with religious vernaculars cannot have assisted the production of conversion narratives. In Hugh Jenkin’s interviews with Putney Labour activists in the 1970s, only two of the stories could possibly be described in such terms. Again, these were conspicuously middle-class examples.¹⁸⁵

On the other hand, as the self-conscious bearers of Labour’s crusading spirit, communists might be expected to have found serviceable a concept so evidently suited to the claims to election they had inherited from the ‘pioneers’. In a broader comparative context, the notion of the born-again communist has been seen both as accentuating the radical discontinuities which underpinned the movement’s teleologies, and as girdling the party, not exactly with a river of fire, but with a ‘symbolic barrier’ of language, belief and ritual. Formalised through the ‘sacralisation’ of the act of joining, the adoption of a distinctive communist calendar and the induction into a new world-view and collective memory, the maintenance of this barrier between ‘comrades and others’ also required a corresponding mental barrier between one’s present and former self. The notion of conversion—of ‘a radical rupture between the past and future of the activist, ritually marking the passage from the exterior to the interior’—was thus integral to communism’s separate institutional identity and its character as a closed society.¹⁸⁶

It is therefore of some significance that in both the individual and collective identities of British communists the idea of such a rupture plays a less than central role. To be more precise, where the CPGB promulgated the rhetoric of conversion, it was attached not so much to the party itself but to the larger goal of socialism with which it sought to be identified. Two major biographical enterprises coming to fruition in the mid-1950s depicted precisely such moments. In one, Dona Torr depicted Tom Mann’s attachment to socialism as a ‘religious phenomenon’ opening onto ‘the truth and wonder of the dawn’.¹⁸⁷ Published a year or two previously, the memoirs of the communist T. A. Jackson also incorporated a late nineteenth-century conversion experience, literally taking place overnight and casting him out among ‘the pariahs and outcasts— the despised, the rejected, the hated, and condemned’.¹⁸⁸ In an unpublished later chapter, it is true that Jackson also emphasised the revelatory power of Leninism, like ‘a world made new’.¹⁸⁹ Nevertheless, it was Mann who had the greatest symbolic resonance for the CPGB, for his adhesion to the party after a lifetime of commitment provided it with a proof of legitimacy which even Morris’s contested legacy left very much as a matter of conjecture and debate. As Dutt put it, ‘history’ required that Mann’s biography reach completion on the CPGB’s central committee, and in the summary versions of his life disseminated by the party this was depicted not as a rebirth but as a fulfilment: an acknowledgement, in Mann’s words, that ‘what [the communists] were out for—I had been out for all my life’.¹⁹⁰ On the other hand, Dutt also complained of the marked and, in communist terms, unorthodox bias of these biographies towards Mann’s pre-communist years, as if viewing his life ‘through the wrong end of the telescope’.¹⁹¹ Perhaps we can think of such accounts as continuity narratives.

At every level, it was in the shape of these continuity narratives that communist life histories were most commonly constructed. The classic case was Pollitt’s Serving My Time, published in 1940. His counterpart Maurice Thorez’s Fils du peuple (1937) has been described as an autobiographical ‘master narrative’ for the French communist party (PCF), and reading Serving My Time in the same way reveals significant differences in political culture even between these two neighbouring communist parties.¹⁹² As if oblivious to Dutt’s concerns, or consciously defying them, Pollitt not only devoted a substantial section of his book to his pre-communist youth and early manhood but depicted it as formative, inspirational and even superior to what followed in socialist idealism. Certainly there was no suggestion that it was incomplete or ‘defective’.¹⁹³ Similarly, the transition to party membership barely punctuated his narrative, and far from having a sacral character was unfavourably contrasted by him with his earlier enrolments into the ILP and the Boilermakers’ Society.¹⁹⁴ Even the one unmistakable allusion to the progression from lower to higher forms of consciousness was an interpolation, most likely by Dutt, into Pollitt’s original text.¹⁹⁵ The foundation myth which Pollitt expounded was therefore not so much that of the party itself, but one attaching to an older, broader and more contested tradition to which he thereby made his own claim. At a personal level, this above all took the form of the direct, explicit and unarguable continuity narrative with which he began his account: the prefatory chapter and frontispiece dedicated to his mother, M ary Louisa Pollitt, a founder-member of both the ILP and the CPGB, a lifelong co-operator and trade unionist and Pollitt’s inductor into the socialist movement.¹⁹⁶ Though the collective self-image of the CPGB was bound up with Pollitt, one could no more generalise from his experiences than regard K erdardie as a typical member of the ILP. Like H ardie, Pollitt’s authority lay in the possession of a personal history that stood out even in its claims to demotic authenticity. Nevertheless, Pollitt was also more than
just a talisman, or a proletarian figurehead for the shadowy Dutt. Though no rigid classification is possible, in our own research we identified no more than three dozen cases of party recruitment comments strongly emphasising themes of conversion or personal transformation. Moreover, the majority of these fell outside the male working-class ‘apprenticeship’ model which Pollitt outlined in his memoirs. Many, again, were middle-class examples, describing how the party rescued them from a sense of isolation, lack of personal purpose or simple desperation. One, for example, joined the CPGB in 1948 out of fear of a third world war.

When I joined the Party... for the first time all of a sudden everything became clear and I stepped into a new world, confident and eager. I had found something worth living and working for, something that revealed history, the present class society and the way to the future and a party which was straightforward and incorruptible.197

Familiarised by the novels of Edward Upward, who himself came to communism not through politics but ‘despair’, the significance of such experiences should not be underestimated in the case of many of the party’s middle-class recruits.198

There was also the issue of gender. For women recruits, however, the transformative effect of membership was associated, not so much with the discovery of discipline and direction, as the lifting of personal horizons beyond prescribed and limiting roles. In a party brochure published in 1953, this was conveyed by a Leeds clothing worker whose political commitment was shown to have reshaped her own personal destiny. ‘Now I could look back and see what a narrow family life I had led’, she wrote.

I had been oppressed and imprisoned, and suddenly I was set free. Can you imagine how a bird in a cage feels, after it has been battering about inside a cage and wearing itself out, when it is suddenly set free? It is so wonderful that you want to tell everyone else in order that they can become free.199

No doubt a little too eloquently expressed, the bird-and-cage image is familiar in women’s writing from the eighteenth century.200 Nevertheless, even in less mediated sources one can find membership described as a doorway from ‘a narrow, useless existence to one with a purpose’, again with a strong sense of personal emancipation: ‘I learned to stand up to my authoritarian mother and became a person for the first time...’201

For the working-class recruit, particularly the male working-class recruit, these emphases are nevertheless overshadowed by continuity narratives, prefiguring communist allegiances either in the ‘vague and indefinite’ way indicated by Snowden or in the form of the consciously articulated values of the labour movement. Generalisation is hazardous, not least because the moment of adhesion varied according to the sharp fluctuations in the communists’ stance towards other social and political groupings. In a group of YCL questionnaires from 1929 held in Moscow, those including elements of a continuity narrative thus tend to be respondents recruited in an earlier phase of ‘united front’ activities, while those joining during the Third Period itself placed greater emphasis on the rupture with older traditions.202 Similarly among our own interviewees, those who became communists during the Cold War frequently expressed a more deep-seated antagonism towards the Labour Party than was common in other periods.203 On the other hand, in periods when the CPGB sought to accommodate itself to the values of the wider movement, the transitions made were typically less dramatic. Over the longer term, these were also the periods in which the party made the great majority of its recruits.

No analysis has been attempted of these variations, but a selection of recruits from Pollitt’s own home territory of South East Lancashire in the years of 1936–42 can provide an illustrative sample. The oldest of them, Herbert Gates, was a Manchester schoolteacher born in 1890 who had joined the ILP just after the First World War, when he claimed to have looked for the communist party but failed to find it. As an active Methodist until well into his forties, it is doubtful whether he would have found a place there, but as an activist in the Labour Party, the labour colleges’ movement, the Minority Movement and the Teachers’ Labour League he was in contact with communists from the 1920s. He nevertheless joined the CPGB only in 1938 through the Left Book Club. Commenting on his ‘long experience of the socialist and TU movement’, his party assessor observed five years later: ‘He still has a few of their characteristics, but is trying very hard and succeeding in adapting himself to present day conditions.’204

It is interesting that the reasons Gates gave for finally joining the CPGB were personal and associational rather than suggesting any dramatic change of outlook. Another recruit from the same period, a Manchester distributive worker, attributed his first glimpse of ‘the socialist utopia’ to a Labour parliamentary candidate in 1923, and as an ILP and Labour Party member the following year had already been impressed by a Manchester communist candidate, William Paul, and his
supporting speakers. Nevertheless, he likewise did not join the CPGB for another twelve years, and posing the question of why he did so, mentioned no specific motivation or occasion but referred back his ‘boyhood days, living in a working-class and slum area’. Like a scene from Pollitt’s Serv ing M y T ime, he began his party autobiography with the image of women toiling at the wash-tub in the cellar: ‘knowing that there was modern machinery to do this work, coupled with the fact that there were a public wash house near by, why did they not use these?’

Percy Higgins, born in 1910, joined the Labour Party in Mossley in 1928, and for the next twelve years endeavoured, as he put it, to ‘give all the time I could to working for Socialism’. However, it was not until 1940 that he made the transition to the communist party, as a result of the People’s Convention movement. H is wife Mary Higgins, who joined at the same time, did so in the continuing belief that she could do ‘better work inside the Labour Party’, which she had joined in Failsworth a decade earlier. Exactly like Pollitt, she described a family pedigree going back to the Chartist, and the involvement of her parents in the ILP and secularist movement; and it was only on hearing Pollitt himself speak that she decided to come out as ‘a “live” member of the Party’. Appropriately enough, the couple were later to move temporarily to the Rhondda to tend Pollitt’s constituency for him.

Mary Kelly, one of the Fairey Aviation recruits already mentioned, was another former ILP and Labour Party activist, who described her recruitment to the party in 1941 by a workmate who ‘came to me with the nine and Lenin, joining the party through trade union contacts. His wife Mary Kelly, one of the Fairey Aviation recruits already mentioned, was another former ILP and Labour Party activist, who described her recruitment to the party in 1941 by a workmate who ‘came to me with the nine and Lenin, joining the party through trade union contacts.

Nothing in these autobiographies conjures up either the outcast or the river of fire, nor, be it said, the ‘desire to be ordinary’ or ‘craving for recognition’ which Raphael Samuel identified with party recruitment. Even internationally, it is an interesting consideration how far the idea of communism as a total rupture has depended disproportionately on the sort of middle-class experiences described in the Cold War bestseller The God that Failed. In any case, in Britain, as Kenneth Newton long ago observed, no satisfactory explanation of communist allegiances will be found in the neuroses and deviant character traits which dominated the interpretations of an earlier era. Instead, both the process of joining and the forms of activity undertaken have more in common with other forms of left-wing activism than has often been recognised. Little comparative research has been carried out on this important subject. However, where testimonies of Labour activists have been collected, as in the highly politicised case like Hugh Jenkins’s Putney, there are innumerable references to the hyper-activism, guilt, personal sacrifice and sense of loyalty, commitment and discipline that have been taken to characterise the standard communist life-history. Similarly, there is the same commitment to a continuous process of party-building as the measure of political advance. Whatever the differences in policy and ideology, compared with the larger body of people who never became active in politics, the CPGB in its social aspects was far closer to established models of labour movement activism than either the party or its detractors ever quite understood.

Perhaps it took an outsider to recognise these features. Although born near Hull in 1884, George Hardy left Britain in his late teens and it was in North America that he was drawn into the socialist movement, eventually as an organiser for the Wobblies. For some twenty years thereafter he was to be involved in a series of agitations—among migrant and unskilled workers in North America, European and colonial seamen and among the proletarians and ‘semi-proletarians’ of the Far East—which had little in common with the settled, upstanding, ‘craft’ basis of the British labour movement. In his autobiography T hose Storm y Years, Hardy even provided the very obverse of a continuity narrative, describing his adherence to communism in the USA as the beginning of a ‘second life’. It is therefore not surprising that during the Class Against Class period he should have come into the sharpest conflict with Pollitt, whom he denounced for insisting to an appreciative Minority Movement audience that the CPGB was not an organisation of ‘street-corner loungers’ but ‘a Party of the working class’. To Hardy this was no accidental statement but ‘undisguised Mac Donaldism’, ‘anti-M arxist’, ‘anti-L eninist’ and attesting the CPGB’s deep ‘reformist roots’. ‘The British comrades must have done forever with their insularity. Their disrespect for “foreign comrades” must cease.’ They must be told that these foreign comrades often understood British issues better than they did themselves. Despite his standing with the international, however, Hardy was never to gain the acceptance with his British comrades that his experience might appear to have warranted. ‘You see’, said one of them a few years later, ‘George has not grown up with the British movement...”

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CHAPTER 2

COMMUNITIES OF THE FAITHFUL

The communist party itself was nothing if not a community, in some respects almost a religious community. ‘One has to appreciate that the party was really a church’, recalls Peter Cadogan, a wartime recruit whose conversion came through reading Lenin in the RAF. ‘You belonged to it. You met your wife in it. You brought your children up in it. It was a great fraternity, a bit like the Catholic church, only secular and up-to-date.’ The sense of bonding was not unique to communism—Cadogan encountered it even more strongly in the anti-war Committee of 100—but it is notable how often communist life histories draw upon religious analogies to convey the personal significance of their party membership. Alan Ecclestone was uniquely placed to make the connection as one of a handful of Anglican clergymen to join the CPGB without relinquishing his position in the church. Wryly, he noted how much his church and party had in common, including communist versions of confirmation classes and a quasi-episcopal hierarchy of party officials. The one real difference was that ‘in the Church people prayed’.1

Even if they did not pray, for many communists the party had a churchlike character grounded in the systemic nature of communist thought and the acts of faith its practice required. Not prayers, admittedly, but catechisms and incantations did exist in communist variants, and to the ‘convert’ or ‘hundred per center’ marxism provided what Cadogan described as a substitute God along with a distinct hieratic authority within the party.2 A key motif in totalitarian interpretations of western communism, this sublimation of religious instincts may particularly be identified with those coming to communism from strongly religious backgrounds, in the CPGB’s case usually Jewish or nonconformist.3 The process was perhaps most vividly described by Douglas Hyde, who from the late 1920s was drawn successively to Methodism, where he was feted as a ‘boy preacher’; to readings in the eastern religions; to a twenty-year membership of the communist party; and finally, in his disillusionment, to the Roman Catholic church. His memoirs, a bestseller of the early 1950s, were entitled I Believed.4

But if Hyde’s most enduring commitment was ultimately to communism, it was less through the superiority of party doctrine than because of the intense sense of identity and belonging he had found within its ranks, and the corresponding sense of loss which he, like so many others, experienced on leaving it.5 It is in this sense, as a body of the initiated, that the communist party may be referred to as a community of the faithful. Extending beyond those moved by devotional impulses, secular ties of comradeship bound the party together, if not as a community, then as an order or fraternity. The CPGB can hardly be compared with Togliatti’s partito nuovo in Italy, with its two million members, proliferation of social organisations and battle with the church for ritual supremacy.6 Dissenting rather than hegemonic, its sections could never have been described as an ‘anti-parish’. Even compared with the Netherlands, the relative absence in Britain of discrete ‘moral communities’ was to some extent reflected in the character of the communist party, whose more limited horizons derived not only from size but from the qualified authority of its rivals, including the parish itself.7

Whether thinly scattered or multitudinous, one of the great strengths of communism was nevertheless its ubiquity. In an age of countless small migrations born of war and depression, it provided an instant port of call for the socially or geographically uprooted, with its own lingua franca, shared values, an esoteric roll-call of celebrities, and habits of meetings, greetings, paper sales and socials to make the new arrival feel instantly at home. Cadogan was one of those who mentioned how moving from one town to another communists would immediately find themselves in ‘instant circulation’.8 In the reception areas of Britain’s inter-war migrations, party groups sprang up like mission huts, while in the general mobilisation of the war years its political freemasonry produced ad hoc contacts and discussion circles occasionally blossoming into surrogate party branches and mock parliaments.9 In India, South Africa or liberated Europe, internationalism was made real by the discovery of a Lenin corner, the familiar rituals of a party meeting, even—for there really was no escaping them—a shelf of works by R. Palme Dutt.10 A subsequent migrant into Britain, like the Trinidadian Trevor Carter, could meet up with friends and find himself attending the party’s West Indian committee within a week.11 ‘I could have gone to any country in Europe, any country practically, or any town in Britain and I would have been welcomed, found a place, looked after’, recalled the Daily Worker’s popular cartoonist ‘Gabriel’. ‘You had comrades everywhere, and it was comrades.’12
‘Comrade’ was the keyword. Of calamitous effect in legitimising regimes of oppression, an attachment to the language and symbols of belonging held the party together, even as it jeopardised its claims to a wider acceptance. Communists were not unaware of the tension. A lastair Wilson was a councillor and general practitioner in Aberdare, who had followed the footprints of inter-war migration the other way after joining the CPGB at Cambridge in 1932. During the war, in the party weekly World News and Views, he proposed doing away with the Internationale, the hammer and sickle and even the simple word comrade as an ‘unnecessary barrier’ to a wider public. Readers who had taken in their stride the CPGB at Cambridge in 1932. During the war, in the party weekly World News and Views, he proposed doing away with the Internationale, the hammer and sickle and even the simple word comrade as an ‘unnecessary barrier’ to a wider public. 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vicarage—illustrate the point perfectly. A total institution, even an open one, must preclude the possibility of belonging to any other community, let alone one making comparable claims upon the individual, and to varying degrees in different countries this was sometimes achieved. In Ecclestone’s case, however, either party, church or—most likely—both, evidently failed the test.

Workplace politics and the party branch

Underpinning everything was organisation, and underpinning organisation was the party branch or cell. Every communist in theory belonged to one, and the branch purportedly provided the democratic foundation to the pyramidal edifice of democratic centralism. In ‘total’ interpretations of communist politics, it has a crucial function as the means of atomisation, forbidding horizontal links as a form of factionalism and having no other lines of communication than the commands it received from above. Pluralism, federalism and the representation of special interests were all excluded in a gesture of subordination to the party, while the branch itself functioned as an agent of ideological homogenisation, immunising its members against outside influences. At the same time, the denial of elective affinities meant that each basic ‘unit’ was in theory a microcosm of the whole, naturally varying in social composition but within its own limited catchment area transcending these social differences in the shared disciplines and comradeship of the party. ‘A member should not think of himself as a member of XYZ Branch or Local (with the suggestion of local separatism) thus given’, stated the seminal Duft-Pollitt Report on Organisation; ‘he is a member of the Communist Party, working in such and such a group or nucleus’.

Almost from the start, however, a form of ‘separatism’ was institutionalised in the form of parallel basic structures of a residential and industrial character. The latter were the key to the party’s so-called Bolshevisation of the 1920s, when workplace cells were established as the basic form of party organisation, and their residential equivalents even referred to as a ‘necessary evil’, of provisional or definitely subordinate status. Twenty years on, a wartime syllabus betrayed the same disregard for ties of home and neighbourhood, dismissively referred to as ‘the place where [members] sleep’, and reaffirmed the factory group as the party’s ‘basic unit’. Though in some respects prefigured by syndicalism, the relocation to the workplace of a party-political commitment was a conception largely unfamiliar to the British left. When first promoted in the mid-1920s, it encountered resistance on the part of the party’s ‘older membership’, perhaps because they were used to established ways of doing things, but also because the commitments of older married men engendered particular apprehensions as to the threat of dismissal which such activities posed. Everywhere this so-called ‘victimisation mentality’ was mentioned as a deterrent to the formation of factory groups, exacerbated by the thin spread of party members and the prevalence in many industries of shift or casual work patterns. If anything summed up the unreality of Bolshevisation, it was this ambition of a mass party of the workshops conceived in a period of mass unemployment and industrial retreat. In 1926, the CPGB claimed around 150 factory groups covering some 1,200 members, although many had an exiguous existence. By 1930 the number had fallen to just thirty-nine, with a membership of barely two hundred.

With the recovery of the labour market and the attainment of a critical mass of communists in many key industrial enterprises, the party’s factory organisation recovered to reach a peak of nearly 1,200 party groups or branches during the Second World War. Ironically coinciding with sustained efforts to establish the party’s legitimacy as a mainstream political actor, the attainment of such a presence simultaneously revealed the potential threat to the party’s cohesiveness which the maintenance of distinct forms of organisation posed. It was partly to confront this issue, partly as a preparation for the coming election and partly as a gesture to trade-union loyalty, that in 1944 the CPGB’s factory branches were replaced with factory committees and their existing members transferred wholesale to residential units. Simultaneously, in place of the old industrial ‘bureaux’, advisory committees were established embracing not only trade-union interests but professional workers, consumers and local authority representatives. To a limited extent the reform achieved its objects, and in the careers of some industrial activists the attempt at a unitary form of organisation provided the one occasion on which they exercised significant responsibilities on the party’s area committees, including the oversight of industrial work. Nevertheless, the experiment was quickly abandoned. Combined with the effect of widespread redundancies, it was seen as having severely damaged the party’s factory organisation, with the loss of hundreds of party members whose conception of membership was rooted in the culture and rhythms of the workplace. With the new Cold War perspective of ‘great class battles’, and of industry as the decisive site of those battles, the factory group or branch was thus again formally recognised as the ‘main basic unit’ of the party, and precisely what distinguished it as a communist party.
In numerical terms, the recovery was limited, never reaching even half the wartime figure and falling steadily from the 1950s. On the other hand, the objective of factory-based organisation did serve to reaffirm the pre-eminence of industrial work. This, insisted Pollitt, should come ‘before anything else’, and possibly it came even before the party itself.29 Despite the best intentions, even factory branches became largely focused on sectional industrial issues, while in the absence of such branches the same preoccupation was expressed in an orientation to union activities to the neglect or disparagement of local and sometimes district party organisations. As early as 1924, the party’s political secretary complained how communists in such positions tended not to be ‘good Party men’.30 In Manchester just before the war, the problem of ‘divorcement’ from the local party was again ascribed not to factory groups but to a broader orientation towards the labour movement so that members ‘had no time for the party’.31 In South Wales, where there had never been many industrial units, the party organiser commented three decades later on ‘the non-interest and non-attendance’ at party meetings of ‘so-called industrial or trade union comrades’.32 A parallel may be drawn here with the industrial ‘cells’ and geographical ‘sections’ of a party like the PCI, where the decline of the former coincided with the increasing autonomy of the CGIL union confederation, and its slippage from overt political direction to more traditional union functions.33 In Britain, by an analogous process, activists displaced from factory branches were not absorbed into the party’s residential structures, but into straightforward trade-union activism, often to the virtual exclusion of other party commitments.34

Variously described as ‘syndicalism’ or ‘economism’, this ‘divorce’ contributed materially to the bitter internal divisions of the CPGB’s final years, whose origins or preconditions can thus be traced much further back into the party’s history. On the other hand, as the complex alignments of the 1980s also demonstrated, the character of these relationships cannot be expounded merely at the level of generalities. Rather, the stock figure of the ‘trade union comrade’ was shaped according to a number of variables including the diversity or otherwise of employment patterns, the involvement of women in the paid workforce and the spatial relationship between place of work and residence. Interacting with a wide variety of regional and occupational cultures, this meant that the character and significance of the local party organisation were anything but standardised. Without necessarily doing justice to the specificities of party life, on the basis of existing secondary literatures and our own broader overview, it is at least possible to point to some of the more obvious patterns.

The Welsh and Scottish coalfields

At one extreme there was the coalfield phenomenon of the ‘isolated mass’. Long before sociologists coined the term, communist organisers in the 1920s identified the coalfields as providing conditions ‘from every point of view… the most favourable’ for the party’s development. ‘They are massed together in the towns and villages’, ran a factory groups’ report from 1925.

Their conditions are bad, and obviously bad. They are largely free from the distracting influences of the cities. Their time is not so broken up, as it is with workers who live in the big cities, by the long journeys and the many varieties of amusement the big cities provide… Their minds are more fallow. The fact of exploitation is very obvious to them…[T]he pits, themselves, provide opportunities for instant contact and the development of the sense of solidarity amongst them.34

Culturally and to some extent demographically, South Wales is often taken as the epitome of these single-industry communities. In the often cited words of miners’ leader Will Paynter, the ‘Fed’, or South Wales Miners’ Federation (SWMF), ‘was the single decisive union operating in the pits, the communities existed around the pit, the union branches were based upon it, hence the integration of pit, people and union into a unified social organism’.35

If this was a potentially favourable environment for communism, the generation of powerful collective identities independent of the party’s own institutional structures gave rise to attitudes which within the CPGB were regarded as highly problematic. In a loose usage essentially signifying detachment from politics, the issue was often defined as one of ‘syndicalism’. Visiting South Wales in 1935, Harry Pollitt noted that the power of the miners’ lodge was ‘really enormous, everything revolves round this’.36 Five years later he complained that tendencies to regard the SWMF as a ‘substitute’ for the party were worsening.37 Personifying these tendencies was Arthur Horner, one of a group of communists on the SWMF executive and since 1936 the federation’s president. Already by 1940 Horner had become somewhat casual in his observance of party commitments and as early as 1933 sought release from the party’s district committee to concentrate on other work.38 Although he remained a member of its central committee, and in 1937 was made South Wales district chairman, his absence from the crucial debates over the war in...
September-October 1939 exemplified Horner's competing obligations and the strategic use he made of them to distance himself from the party's authority. The symptom of a wider problem, Horner represented a mining cadre which at every level seemed to get sucked into the affairs of the federation.

The consequences for the party's local organisational culture were more complex than might be imagined. To outsiders, including Pollitt, South Wales was notorious as a 'man's world' based on a rigid sexual division of labour. Often this is seen to have been reproduced politically in the 'separate spheres' by which the Labour Party, and in this case also the communist party, are said to have functioned as 'male-dominated preserves', with women's activities confined to their own subordinate political sections. There is some evidence of women's involvement in the CPGB's Rhondda branches in the mid-1920s, apparently due to the formation of women's sections and bolstered by the disaffiliation of a number of Labour Party women's sections. King Street at this time tended to frown upon such forms of organisation, arguing for women members to be 'definitely organised in the basic units of the Party... and... encouraged to enter into every possible phase of Party activity'. This does not appear to have happened, however, and Sue Bruley's extensive researches suggest that the woman party cadre was 'practically non-existent' in South Wales. According to William Gallacher, there was at first even a branch there refusing to admit women, as 'their place was in the home'. On the other hand, in 1929 the party's women's sections in the Rhondda were specifically cited as a model of effective women's work by the London schoolteacher Kath Duncan.

Conversely, it was not always the case that the party branches themselves formed part of the 'male network' centred upon the pit. Despite the centrality of coal, there was little tradition in South Wales of communist pit branches, largely because the Fed itself was based upon the workplace lodge and in that respect at least conformed to the canons of Bolshevisation. Paradoxically, it was therefore the party branches which provided the social-democratic alternative of residential organisation, and as such were largely peripheral to the masculine world of the pit. Even the unemployed, while excluded from the pit, remained focused on the lodge, with continuing if restricted membership rights even where pits were idle. During Class Against Class, the area's 'trade union legalism' took the strong form of 'Hornerism', though most of the party's members were unemployed. Ten years later Pollitt referred to the 'really striking inactivity' of party branches regarding such 'day-to-day questions' as workmen's compensation and silicosis. 'It is not enough to leave this type of question to the miners' lodges', he warned. 'We must drive to bring behind our campaign and demands every section of the community...'. How little can have changed, however, is suggested by complaints as late as 1967, with pits everywhere closing, that party branches remained excluded from the "everyday politics" of the trade union and industrial field.

Women cadres and mining communities

Paradoxically, the increasing absorption of leading communists within the Fed seems to have left space for the emergence of a small number of leading women party cadres. Indeed, between the 'workerist' phase of Class Against Class and the impact of second-wave feminism, South Wales provided two of the very few women from working-class backgrounds to sit on the party executive. One was Mavis Llewellyn, a central committee member from 1938 to 1943 and an Ogmore and Garw local councillor. The other was Annie Powell, an executive member for seventeen years and a Rhondda borough councillor for over thirty. In 1979 she became Britain's first communist mayor since Joe Vaughan in Bethnal Green almost at the party's foundation. Though her experiences had included a spell as South Wales women's organiser, she had also taken on the key responsibilities of full-time area organiser and parliamentary candidate for this most prized and prejudiced of party strongholds.

Though suggestive of hidden complexities, such isolated cases did not necessarily threaten to subvert the 'man's world' of the valleys. According to Paynter, himself described as 'the pitman's patriarch', it was the lodge officers who were regarded—and regarded themselves—as the 'village elders to whom the people went with their worries and woes', the real 'guides, philosophers and friends to a community'. To the extent that this was so, with the union providing a 'kind of working-class party or even a government', then the advancement of women to conventional party or local government responsibilities did not necessarily cut across the 'welfarist' roles which Chris Williams has described as characteristic of the local political women's sections. It was typical, for example, that Llewellyn should have chaired the local council's welfare committee and exercised particular responsibilities for the care of evacuated children.

At the same time, the regard in which such individuals were held did not necessarily extend to other women in the same communities. Both Powell and Llewellyn were schoolteachers enjoying an exceptional standing within their communities through the relaxation of what remained...
the prevailing resistances to women's personal advancement. Even in their own estimation, these women did not necessarily disrupt the normal pattern of gender relations in their communities. Llewellyn was the lover of the Rhondda writer and unemployed activist Lewis Jones, assisting him during the writing of his second novel We Live and completing the final section after his premature death in 1939. Perhaps this is reflected in one of the novel's most striking and unusual features: that it is not the male hero but his wife who is elected to the council and in this sphere personifies the leadership qualities of the communist activist. Nevertheless, the novel leaves a general impression of the women's political passivity, particularly in descriptions of the miners' lockout, and it is noticeable that in a later published story of Llewellyn the centrality of the male breadwinner seems taken for granted. Oblivious to the attentions of his wife and daughter, he sits engrossed in the paper on return from work: 'Never mind, he'll pass the Worker over to me later in the evening.' It must have helped provide the space for her own political commitments that Llewellyn herself never married.

Only perhaps in South Wales was so close an identification of community with workplace combined with a significant communist presence. According to David Gilbert, even after the 1920s' pit closures 'the idea of the pit village remained valid' here, whereas in Fife, superficially the nearest point of comparison, Alan Campbell has emphasised the growing disjuncture between pit and community. The continuance in Fife of a residential basis for union organisation, and the rivalry of as many as three competing unions in the inter-war years, can only have reinforced that disjuncture. Though the communists established their only remotely credible attempt at a 'red' union among the Scottish miners, Pollitt explained the weakness of its strike activities by 'the fact that the miners in the majority of cases live considerable distances from the pits where they work... because of the nature of the shift system it was impossible to get them all to one meeting'. Given these circumstances, the miners' union, perhaps even a revolutionary one, was less obviously self-sufficient as a vehicle for male political activism. In Berlin, Eve Rosenberg has suggested that with the separation of work and home, the neighbourhood emerged as 'the one stable frame of reference for the recognition of interests and the construction of remedies'. Also in a German context, Eric Weitz has stressed the role of mass unemployment in producing a shift from workplace politics. Of course, that could have applied equally to South Wales, but for the centrality of the lodge along with higher levels of outward migration suggesting that actually or notionally displaced industrial activists are more likely to have turned up in England than the local party branch. It is suggestive in this connection that whereas Gallacher's West Fife electorate increased by very nearly a third between 1929 and 1945, that of the South Wales stronghold of Rhondda East actually declined.

Whatever the explanation, the communist party in Fife, while to some degree compensating for the weakness of industrial organisation, also provided a more direct reflection of the miners' dominant position in the local community. More than in South Wales, movements can be traced between pit, union, party and local government responsibilities, including county councillors like Bruce Wallace, John M Ca rthur, Alec Moffat and Bob Selkirk. There was, it is true, a development of women's sections during the war years, through the influence of the 'delayed' recruit and women's organiser Jenny Dand, who had been supporting communist positions in the Co-operative Women's Guild since the mid-1930s. In the immediate post-war years, Maria Stewart's name could also be added to the list of councillors. In general, however, women were regarded as 'token members' of the party in Fife even in its final decades. In Lanarkshire their supporting role and virtual invisibility is a striking feature of Frank Watters's recollection of family communism in Shotts.

Perhaps the nearest that Fife had to an Annie Powell was lifetime activist Mary Doherty. The contrast between the two is telling. Although she had actually attended the Lenin School in 1929–30, Doherty's party work by her own account was largely confined to mobilising its women's sections for what seems to have been a continuous round of raffles, bazaars, knitting and jam-making. 'Bob Selkirk was most insistent that the women's section would not develop into a gossiping section; that was why I was put in charge', she recalled of the local party patriarch, and in the same matter-of-fact way described her entrustment with the children's sections: 'We lacked girls in the YCL and the chaps thought children's groups was work for girls so I had to take all the groups myself.' Though Doherty too never married, the influence of this profoundly male-centred culture is suggested by the very title of her published memoirs, A Miner's Lass.

In the absence of detailed local studies, generalisations about whole regions or industries are hazardous in the extreme. Impressionistically, the party in Fife would appear to have been not untypical of Scotland's central industrial belt, where at least to outsiders the dominance of heavy industry seemed reflected in the macho style and political preoccupations of the party's leading committees. In other mining areas, different patterns of residence and employment were linked with further variations in the forms of political participation. In the mining village of...
ties and did not necessarily dominate the local communist party.66 Even
belt, engineers were dispersed across relatively heterogeneous commu-
working centres like Birmingham and the North West London factory
Spread widely across the country, in many areas, including major metal-
1960s they provided the largest industrial grouping among party officials.
and MacManus to the briefer district secondments of the 1950s and
Lancashire or the woollen districts than the Welsh or Scottish coalfields.65
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the movement’s NAC, it seems plausible to link her public role with
ing local figure in the NUWM and the sole female area representative on
On the other hand, given that in the early 1930s she had been the lead-
crowned in 1947 with the opening of a Fanny Deakin Maternity Home.
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movement’s NAC, it seems plausible to link her public role with
Wolstanton, North Staffordshire, ‘Red’ Fanny Deakin was a councillor of
still greater longevity and popular regard than Powell. A sometime SD Per
and IL Per who retained her positions as councillor and poor law guardian
after joining the CPGB in 1923, her standing was essentially a personal
one and she evidently enjoyed considerable independence with regard to
the party.64 Reinforcing this, the solidarities of the isolated Potteries seem
to have offered their own form of security against the Labour Party’s
national rules. In 1934 Deakin was elected to the Staffordshire county
council, and almost until her retirement in 1951 seems to have been
accepted, openly and unconstitutionally, as a member of the Labour
group. Her was very much a ‘welfarist’ agenda: having lost five of her
own six children in infancy, she campaigned on maternity issues and as a
member of the Staffordshire Health Executive Council her efforts were
crowned in 1947 with the opening of a Fanny Deakin Maternity Home.
O n the other hand, given that in the early 1930s she had been the lead-
local figure in the NUWM and the sole female area representative on
movement’s NAC, it seems plausible to link her public role with
Sheffield was known within the communist party as the place where
local party members meant the AEU and not the party itself when they
referred to ‘the district committee’.67 In this respect, the obvious parallel
is with South Wales. Not only was the union a major presence in the
city, with a post-war peak of fifty-two branches and more members
locally than the CPGB had nationally; it was also the institution through
which the CPGB acquired its own not insignificant influence. From its
earliest years the party was dominated by engineers, among whom Ted
Lismer and J.T. Murphy played leading roles in connection with the Red
International of Labour Unions. In the post-war period, it provided a
stream of national and district AEU officers, and from the party strong-
hold of Firth Brown Tools there emerged a succession of communist
district presidents, replaced from within the same CPGB factory branch
as each went on to higher union office.68 One of them, Ken Randell,
mentioned two aspects of this situation particularly recalling South
Wales. O ne was the way in which this influence was exercised not by a
mass campaigning party, but by a relative handful of communists— at
Firth Brown’s perhaps not even twenty in a workforce of two thou-
sand—who were respected less for what they ‘stood for’ as communists
than how they ‘conducted themselves’ as communists. T he other was
that this rooting in a common occupational culture made for dense
interconnections between communism and the broader Labour move-
ment. Randell illustrated this by the example of Ronnie Iremonger, later
leader of Sheffield city council, who as a shopfloor engineer enjoyed
good relations with the communists and particularly the future AEU
officer Les Dixon. ‘Ronnie’, as Randell put it, ‘looked after the political
side’. Epitomised by the AEU Left Unity Committee established in the
1960s, this distinctive culture was to produce such relative oddities as a
Labour MP, Martin Flannery, whose wife was a member of the commu-
nist party’s city secretariat; and the son of a Firth Brown convenor
George Caborn, lately sitting in the Blair government. Even a decade
after the CPGB’s demise, another Firth Brown convenor, the former
communist Derek Simpson, was elected general secretary of the union’s
successor body.

Engineering: Sheffield, Coventry and Oxford
The CPGB’s other great area of industrial strength was engineering. M
tal workers were more closely integrated than miners into the broader
work of the party, and from the early prominence of Murphy, Gallacher
and MacManus to the briefer district secondments of the 1950s and
1960s they provided the largest industrial grouping among party officials.
Spread widely across the country, in many areas, including major metal-
working centres like Birmingham and the North West London factory
belt, engineers were dispersed across relatively heterogeneous communi-
dies and did not necessarily dominate the local communist party.66 Even
where they did, the precise imprint again depended on a range of vari-
ables including patterns of migration and residential settlement and the
period and circumstances in which a communist presence was first estab-
lished. In Sheffield and Coventry, where the party emerged in the early
1920s out of the wreckage of the shop stewards’ movement, communism
had a masculine, industrial character, albeit manifested in subtly differ-
ent ways. More obviously distinct was the new industrial settlement of
Cowley, Oxford, where the closer integration of community and work-
place and saliency of community-related issues made for a less compart-
mentalised approach.

According to Florence Keyworth, who joined there during the war, the
party in Sheffield was also ‘very male dominated’ and members were left
in no doubt that the ‘important people’ were the ones at the ‘indus-
trial base’.69 However, parallels with the coalfields do not entirely hold,
and in Sheffield a more or less continuous thread of women’s organisa-
tion can also be traced. As early as 1924, the city was one of the first to
set up a successful party women’s committee, naturally meeting in the
AEU Institute and blossoming into discussion once the ‘male leader’ initially assigned them was transferred to other work.70 The same year, a women’s section of the NUWM was formed with a claimed membership of 350, and still in 1935 the city had the largest recorded women’s section with three hundred members. In 1929, it was not only the sole such section represented at the movement’s national conference, but it was on Sheffield’s initiative that an NUWM women’s section was set up.71 Also in 1929, Sheffield’s Annie Cree was the first ‘housewife’ to be elected to the party’s central committee.72 However, it is the NUWM section which is revealing in its recognition of a presence in the local labour market which, though uneven and contested, had no parallel in many mining areas. With the ending of mass unemployment, and with the admission of women to the AEU in 1943, this meant that women too could be classed among the ‘important people’. Indeed, even before the big increase in the number of women shop stewards in the late 1960s, the possibility existed of an ‘industrial comrade’ like Vi Gill, Firth Brown deputy convenor and another AEU district committee member, following her mentor George Caborn onto the party executive and even, in her case, onto the political committee.

Coventry was another engineering city in which the communist party’s origins lay in the First World War shop stewards’ movement. In both cities, the industrially orientated SLP provided the main basis for the first communist organisation, and in Coventry there was also a branch of the Wobbies and a rare provincial showing of the Workers’ Socialist Federation. Nevertheless, according to Frank Carr, the Coventry Workers’ Committee was more significant than any of these.73 Avowedly a variant of revolutionary syndicalism, it was a movement offering little space to the conventional party activist, and it is telling that one of its few middle-class adherents, H.W. Emery, resigned a commercial position and took up work in the factory on hearing the call of revolutionary socialism.74 ‘I resigned my situation and entered a factory. That was my answer’ he recalled, and the sense of dramatic transition was reinforced when his wife then left him to join the Catholic church.

With the post-war collapse of the shop stewards’ movement, syndicalism was forced onto the streets. As a basically prosperous town momentarily fallen on hard times, the city briefly witnessed the unusual conjuncture of mass unemployment with a substantial internal migration, and thus the simultaneous deprivation of uprooted young men of both homes and jobs. Among the addresses given in an early CPGB branch directory, Coventry’s organiser alone is to be tracked down at a local men’s hostel, and more perhaps than anywhere else in England Coventry communism at first had the character of an almost semi-insurrectionary movement of unemployed men.75 One of its leaders was Jack Leckie, a Scottish miner fresh from drilling men in Fife, where he boasted Sinn Fein connections and is depicted concluding one platform debate with his fist under his reformist opponent’s nose. In the Midlands, he was advertised as ‘a physical force Anarchist and ardent anti-Parliamentarian who breathes dynamite and talks red armies’, while Gallacher in his memoirs recalled him goading a Birmingham audience to ‘a wild frenzy’.76 Jack Preece, the secretary of the Coventry ‘Soviet’ or unemployed committee, was known as Dagger Jack thanks to his ‘habit of flourishing a knife at public meetings’, while Emery himself had links with the IRA and fled the country to avoid arrest after a raid on the Birmingham Small Arms factory.77 Predictably, the branch was again male-dominated, and in Frank Carr’s account not a single woman is mentioned. Politically, the Coventry communists were strongly opposed to the emerging Labour Party, and when Leckie’s parliamentary candidate was withdrawn in the interests of the united front in 1922, it passed a resolution threatening secession.78

These political differences may help explain the decline of the party in Coventry already by 1923. At the same time, international commitments took their toll: Leckie was now working with the KPD and MOPR, or International Red Aid, in Berlin, while Emery was overseeing MOPR’s British affairs from Moscow, where he was now regarded as something of a liability by the CPGB and is last heard of in 1926 protesting against objections to his returning to Britain. More fundamentally, the communist presence in the city was affected by the return of relative prosperity from 1923, and when an effective communist movement later re-emerged it was in the more conventional guise of the second shop stewards’ movement, peaking in the latter years of the Second World War.79 Socially, however, underlying continuities remained in the party’s domination by skilled male workers. In some respects this was a model party, boasting one of the highest ratios of party members organised in factory branches: in 1953 some 43 per cent of members and over half of the city’s branches, figures more than twice those for the predominantly industrial Middlesbrough district as a whole.80 Even as this presence faded away, with communists increasingly working as individuals or through loose left-wing networks, semi-formal meetings of ‘industrial comrades’ took place at least into the 1970s.81 As late as 1985, Samuel cited the city’s last surviving factory branch issuing a statement baldly reaffirming the centrality of the unions to all prospects of social advance.82
Politically, this was linked to the preoccupation with industrial issues which within the CPGB was usually referred to as economism or syndicalism. As Carr suggests, early campaigns over unemployment were little more than a substitute for industrial struggle, involving the same groups of skilled workers. Even the housing shortages they experienced aroused little in the way of a political response. Twenty years later, at the moment of its wartime expansion, the party's Coventry city organiser similarly noted the tendency there 'to regard the Party as a militant force in the Trade Unions and nothing more'. A decade further on, once more the criticism was made of the factory branches that 'social issues' were not seen as relevant to factory workers, nor factory issues as matters for party policy. On the other hand, even more pronouncedly than in Sheffield, the shop stewards themselves functioned as what the Coventry MP Richard Crossman called the praetorian guard of the local Labour movement, instinctively sympathetic to communism and regarding the Labour Party itself simply as 'the political instrument of trade unionism'. According to Frank Allaun, another Labour MP and a former communist, the car workers by this time had supplanted the miners as the vanguard section of the working class. No doubt such a perception seemed to legitimise a preoccupation with their own industrial struggles, and concerns began to be expressed that the party's factory branches were functioning as glorified works councils.

Nevertheless, car workers were no more a homogeneous grouping than miners. In Oxford, the CPGB outside of the university was also dominated by male engineering workers, and these were even likelier than in Coventry to have come from the depressed areas. In this case, however, union activism was combined with an orientation to community and even electoral politics, and vigorous campaigns over housing issues themselves proved a conduit into the party of industrial workers like Arthur Exell. Conversely, communists recruited in the factory showed less disinclination to become active in the wards and branches. Norman Brown, a shop steward, local election candidate and chairman of both his local party branch and its Midlands metal bureau, claimed that no political tension was felt between these commitments, though practically they brought him to the verge of a nervous breakdown. Usually, Brown and Exell even took at face value the party's exhortations to set up factory shock brigades, an idea which received short shrift in more established industrial cultures.

In his study of migration to the two cities, A.J. Chandler has suggested a number of possible explanations for these differences. One is that in Coventry, as already described, the migrants were absorbed into a well-established, militant working-class culture of a markedly syndicalist character. Another was the proximity in Oxford of home and workplace, through the siting near the factory of newly built workers' housing estates replicating something of the social environment of the pit village, but without the pre-existing domination of the union. Though such an outcome was unplanned, it suggests intriguing parallels between the party's factory branches and its Midlands metal bureau, claimed that no political tension was felt between these commitments, though practically they brought him to the verge of a nervous breakdown. Usually, Brown and Exell even took at face value the party's exhortations to set up factory shock brigades, an idea which received short shrift in more established industrial cultures.

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were dispersed across and beyond the city in a way itself encouraging the separation of social and industrial issues. Such circumstances no doubt help to explain why the transfer from factory to residential branches in 1945 had the ‘disastrous consequences here that James Hinton has described. A Manchester AEU steward, Eddie Frow, described what happened with the similarly dispersed working-class membership in locations like Trafford Park:

thousands of members that had joined in the factory had joined without discussing it with their wives and families or even necessarily shouting a lot about communism in the house or even going out in any communist party activity. They’d been factory activists, they’d talked to the lads they worked with, they’d gone to communist party meetings in their dinnertime and had read the Daily Worker and communist party pamphlets… But they weren’t communists in the traditional thirties’ mould…

Though only a sketch is possible here, a possible hypothesis for comparative research begins to suggest itself. In conditions of mass unemployment and oppressive managerial authority, the separation of work and residence seems to be identified with the concentration of communist activity on the place of residence. This is what Rosenhaft describes in Weimar Berlin and can perhaps be detected in a milder variant in inter-war Fife. However, the further complicating factor would have to be incorporated into such research that in some settlements a form of industrial paternalism was reflected in the controlled housing of the company town or village. Along with many pit villages, this was true of ICI, Billingham, where it is notable that the influence of communists like George Short was felt more among the Jewish youth of Middlesbrough than the largely pacified ex-miners of the chemical industry. Indeed, on Teesside ‘quite a number of people who worked in the ICI but weren’t natives of the area helped in the education of party people... and organised campaigns’—seemingly a case of a degree of radicalisation finding expression not only outside the workplace but beyond the wider environment dominated by the company.

On the other hand, where as a result of more favourable industrial conditions the factory was available as a political nexus, the same process of separation, reinforced by the political priority accorded work in industry, can be seen to have produced the opposite effect. This, it would seem, was precisely what happened in Coventry.

Two further considerations allow an insight into these disparate party cultures. One is the physical character of the branch: the place where it actually met. Generally speaking, the ideal was for local party organisations to maintain their own premises, in which the ambience of the total party might at least theoretically have been maintained. In practice, the habit of meeting in members’ homes, union premises or pubs not only showed how elusive such a conception really was, but reinforced the distinctive characteristics of regional and local party cultures. In Scotland where the pub was anything but a respectable institution, and communists like Gallacher and Stewart were deeply moulded by the temperance movement, it was more or less unthinkable for party meetings to take place in pubs, and the somewhat severe character of Scottish communism may have been connected with this. Even in Leicester, a city rarely identified with hedonism, Harry M Shane was shocked to find local communists ‘more often in the pub than on the platform’, and even on the platform dispensing entertainment rather than political nourishment. Elsewhere, to be cut off from the pub was to be cut off from the dominant culture of the labour movement. In the Rhondda, women’s low political involvement was attributed to the union meeting in the pub on Sunday mornings while they were ‘cooking the dinner’. In Sheffield, as we have seen, communist party meetings were at first held in the AEU institute, though the AEU did not at that time admit women members. Some years later, Florence Keyworth recalled nervously to enter her first pub to attend a meeting of the city’s YCL, only to sit there disregarded while a group of young men discussed the AEU. In Eccles, Lancashire, in a dispute in which both drink and union connections apparently played a part, the party branch at one point became deeply divided over whether or not to meet in the local AEU club.

It was in Coventry that the symbiosis of pub and party seems to have been most complete. Leading figures there like Bill Gee and Tom Dingley are said to have succumbed to drink, and in 1923, the Sheffield teetotaller J.T. Murphy hissed in a King Street report: ‘Beer is the curse of the Coventry branch and the club is nothing but a boozing show’. According to the local party women’s organiser, ‘you had to be a drinker to succeed in the party in Coventry’, and during wartime beer shortages the availability of alcohol was usually the key consideration in determining party meeting places.

A final variable shedding light on these different admixtures of the industrial and the political is the CPGB’s contrasting performance in parliamentary and local elections. Again Coventry stands at one extreme, and even at the apogee of the CPGB’s very limited electoral achievement, the alleged ‘failure to understand the political role of the Party’ was
borne out by its communist candidates receiving fewer votes per party member in 1945 than anywhere else in the country. Both here and in Sheffield, the call of a wider Labour movement loyalty was such that many communists were reluctant to contest the election at all: in Coventry it was ‘difficult to get factory workers to work in their localities’, while ‘some leading industrial comrades thought election did not concern them’.107 This may again be contrasted with Oxford, where communists cycled out to help the party’s agricultural specialist in his hopeless contest in Abingdon.108 More emphatically, it could be contrasted not only with dynamic community politics of a seat like Stepney Mile End, which Phil Piratin won in 1945, but with the North London dormitory constituency of Hornsey. Here, in what in some ways was the most remarkable result of the campaign, a communist party with little factory presence but a strong orientation towards campaigning issues amassed over 10,000 votes: the largest ever communist vote in an English constituency.109 Again, there is no simple typology, and despite its ‘syndicalist’ characteristics, the CPGB polled impressively in the Rhondda—perhaps because there had not since 1929 been a Conservative candidate to exploit the split working-class vote. In the 1945 municipal elections, where this constraint was obviously less compelling, candidates in London are said to have averaged over a quarter of the poll, and again did well in Oxford.110 In Coventry, however, even in absolute terms the communist candidates provided the worst votes by far in the Midlands. In the nearby Birmingham Sparkbrook ward, a popular doctor and community activist, Mollie Barrow, almost equalled the communist candidates’ share of the poll was barely a fifth of hers.111

**Intellectuals**

Asked to describe the CPGB’s activities among intellectual and professional workers, the British delegation to the Comintern’s Fifth World Congress in 1924 replied: ‘None’.112 The information was not offered apologetically, and whatever its failings in the Comintern’s eyes the CPGB at least had this virtue, that its basically proletarian character was second to none. Even at its foundation, intellectuals were less preponderant in its leadership than in parties like the PCF and PCI; and while the guild socialists and Hald's group each provided founding contingents, prejudices were only hardened by a series of well-publicised defections that came to a head in that same year of 1924.

Some of those involved, like Ellen Wilkinson, were Labour candidates threatened with disqualification under revised Labour Party rules. Others, like the Lansbury protégés Francis Meynell and Raymond Postgate, were journalists for whom communism had now outlived its promise of opportunity and romance. Sometimes the suspicion felt for such figures was encouraged by their undisguised social presumption. William Mellor, another Hald journalist and former guild socialist, was recalled as ‘offensively patrician in appearance, manner and speech’ as he put the case for higher party salaries in 1921.113 Leaving the CPGB in 1924, after a failed attempt to secure Comintern funding for the Hald, Mellor accepted the paper’s editorship under official auspices just two years later. J.T. Walton Newbold, who also left in 1924, was a hugely self-regarding Marxist theorist and the first MP to be elected as a communist. Thinking nothing of asking working-class hosts to keep their ‘brats’ quiet, he was also punctilious in exacting speaking fees, explaining to one disgusted organiser that by his outlay on books he had even run into debt—‘something I have never hitherto allowed myself... except to my own parents’. Discounting motivations of principle and effectiveness, such defections entered party legend as a cautionary tale, not so much of intellectuals as of the ‘big-wigs’ and careerists immortalised in Pollitt’s *Serving My Time.*114

What the answer ‘none’ therefore signified was not that the CPGB had failed to attract any intellectual recruits, but that these were refused any special standing, mainly confined to subordinate functions and valued for their technical capacities, not their ideas or associations. Both indeed were positively distrusted. Encouraging the assertion of this unambiguous working-class identity were not only the ‘Bolshevisation’ measures progressively introduced during the 1920s, but what communists regarded as the middle-class takeover of the Parliamentary Labour Party hastened by their own simultaneous exclusion from membership rights. Against this tide of ‘middle-class political careerists’ they therefore promoted their own leadership of worker-intellectuals, many of them shaped by the fiercely proletarian SLP or the active refusal of Oxbridge patronage represented by the labour colleges’ movement.115 Secured by Comintern funding against traditional dependencies, they scorned the presumption of the privileged and disdained the benefits of their vaunted education. The Webbs had sometimes thought of themselves as ‘clerks’ to the labour movement, and it was as clerks alone that their successors were tolerated within the communist party.

It was therefore appropriate that the one distinctive grouping of communist intellectuals in the 1920s was that centred upon the Webbs’ own foundation and brainchild, the Labour (formerly Fabian) Research
Maintaining Webbian traditions of largely underpaid or voluntary service, the LRD’s succession of London offices not only provided close proximity to the union headquarters whose affiliations it sought, but allowed access to the pool of educated, public-spirited and often independently provided young people who for decades had proved the mainstay of innumerable voluntary organisations. Of the twenty-six paid or voluntary LRD workers recorded on the M anchester database, all but five had attended a university, most of them Cambridge, London or O xford in descending order. Of the others, three were South Wales miners who had attended the C entral Labour College, one was a sometime theological student, and the last was the ill-fated Rose Cohen, from an East London Jewish background but coming into contact with middle-class rebels through S ylvia P ankhurst and G.D.H. C ole.

Again a transitional period can be detected in which the Labour Research Department harboured far from clerk-like hopes of wresting the party’s direction from its working-class leadership, and former G uild S ocialists like R ajai and C lemens D utt, H ugo R athbone, R ose C ohen and M ary M oorhouse used their personal contacts and greater freedom of travel to maintain ill-regulated and somewhat resented links with the C omintern and its A ngle-A merican secretariat, especially under the H ungarian J osef P ogány or ‘P epper’. H owever, after a challenge for the party leadership came to a head in 1923, most of these figures became progressively integrated into the main structures of the party, while the L RD for its part was provided with its first and only working-class secretary in the shape of the miner and returning L enin School student B ill W illiams. Appointed in 1928, W illiams remained at the L RD until 1945, when he went to work for the newly formed N ational U nion of M ineworkers; and despite its continuing attraction to intellectuals, the department was never again to show signs of ‘separatism’.

Almost a precondition of the intellectual’s continuing adhesion to the Bolshevising communist party was an unassuming disposition contrasting markedly with the easy arrogations possible within the Labour Party and IL P. A rguably the most gifted and committed representative of the type was R alph Fox, best remembered as the novelist, critic and ‘writer in arms’ who was killed at C ordova in J anuary 1937. B orn in H alfax in 1900 and educated at M agdalen College and the S orbonne, F ox joined the C PG B within months of its formation and after graduating in 1922 went with its approval on a Q uaker re lief mission to the U SSR. H is commitment fortified by the experience, uniquely for a communist of the 1920s he expressed it in the form of novels which secured the interest of mainstream commercial publishers. A t the same time, F ox was forced out of his first job as a teacher and then reportedly ‘refused an offer of a P rofessorship of Ethnology on the grounds that it would divorce [him] from the Party’. C ommunism, to quote the title of one of his novels, meant ‘storming heaven’ itself, and for this Fox seemed prepared to sacrifice all the conventional advantages of his class.

As the answer ‘none’ suggests, the party did not exactly take full advantage of such commitments. T hough professedly lacking ‘professionally trained intellectual elements’, it made little apparent effort to retain those it had in Britain, and if anything released them for international responsibilities more readily than it did its working-class activists. F ox himself spent over four years in three separate stints in M oscow, the longest of them from 1929 to 1932 at D avid R iazanov’s M ax-Engels Institute. T hough work in M oscow could still provide a more congenial environment for the intellectual—it was Fox himself, ‘desirous of going to Russia’, w ho raised the question of his working for the C omintern—ever under R iazanov he was said to be employed at ‘technical librarian work easily to be performed by non-Party members’. I n Britain the highest responsibility he attained was that of assistant editor at the ostensibly non-party S unday W orker, where the heterodox enthusiasms he brought to its literary page drew the derision of some correspondents. O ne, apparently A itken F erguson, a former S L P e and the ‘best-read’ communist in S cotland, styled himself ‘C lydebank R iveter’ while excoriating the ‘driftwood and scum’ borne along by the working-class struggle. N ot only was F ox not considered for the party executive, but as the one prominent British communist in M oscow in the winter of 1925–6 was not entrusted with the formal party mandate relinquished on his return to Britain of E rnest B rown.

In a period when a Labour parliamentary nomination could be obtained on the strength of a father’s cheque, such an experience can be compared most instructively with that of F ox’s M agdalen contemporary, J ohn S trachey. C om ing from a background steeped in conservatism and embracing the Labour movement three years after F ox, S trachey had edited the M iner and S ocialist R eview, sat as M P for a B irmingham constituency, abetted O swald M osley in his leadership ambitions and generally cut a far from self-effacing figure, all by the age of thirty. F ox, by contrast, was remarkable only for being inconspicuous, and almost every portrait we have of him refers to his extreme ‘modesty’, even as a tutor at the L enin School.

W as this the result of bdashings by C lydebank riveters, or was it only the unassertive who were likely to tolerate their attentions? A . L . M orton, C ambridge-educated and a sometime contributor to T. S. E liot’s C riterion,
later recalled without resentment the ‘hard time’ he had on joining the CPGB in 1929, when ‘as an intellectual you kept a pretty low profile...[W]hen I came in...I had to spend a long time chalking in the streets and carrying the platform and doing all the menial tasks—not that I minded, I expected to do this’. O'others were less complaisant. Of the relatively tiny group we can identify as joining the CPGB from the universities in the mid to late-1920s, two, Jane Tabrisky and Freda Utley, became identified with the leftism allegedly rife in the Marx-Engels Institute. At gatherings in Moscow apartments, this was sometimes expressed as support for the anathematised Trotsky, more perhaps as a model of intellectual independence than because of the detailed programmes with which he was identified. Already in Britain, Utley had incurred the CPGB's censure for invoking Lenin's concept of ‘economism’ to demonstrate the primacy of theory and absolve the intellectual from ‘play[ing] at being a proletarian’. Tabrisky, on the other hand, had been commended by the CPGB for her ‘intelligence and rapidity of mind’, already manifested as a voluntary worker at the LRD, and she was defended along with Fox during the so-called ‘cleanup’ of Riazanov's institute.

Both of them quickly broke with communism, Utley to write one of the finest ‘Cold War’ memoirs about her Russian experiences, and Tabrisky—as Jane Degas—to edit authoritative collections of Comintern documents for the Royal Institute of International Affairs. If essentially their rebellion was about the standing of intellectuals within the party, differences of generation and political formation cut across the simple opposition of worker and intellectual. Hence, it was Pollitt whom Utley recalled supporting her against the ‘little bureaucrats in the party, while Eric Godfrey, a contemporary of hers at King's College, London, took pride in his role in exposing both Utley and Tabrisky as ‘Trotskyists—or worse' while working in Moscow. Even the loyalist Fox was tested by such allegations. With Pollitt's approval, in 1933 he published a biography of Lenin which immediately received a stinging rebuke from a Comintern rapporteur accusing Fox of Trotskyism. Though he he vehemently protested his innocence, Dutt also chipped in to condemn Fox’s ‘romantic literary’ tone and individualism, adding rather ominously that the allegation of Trotskyism was merely ‘not...proved’.

Characteristic of the Bolshevising 1920s, and legitimised by over-literal interpretations of ‘Class against Class’, this suspicion of the intellectual, though not the Trotskyist, was only really abated during the course of the 1930s. By the time of Fox’s death in January 1937, though his self-abnegation was strongly emphasised, his singling out for tribute in the first of the Spanish war’s memorial volumes underlined the new public standing of the communist intellectual. Indeed, though it took Sidney Webb to point out the lack of any mention of his Lenin in Fox's obituaries, the omission was rectified in the memorial volume, where two long extracts were accompanied by a fulsome vindication of the work by T.A. Jackson. Even in 1932, Strachey's delayed conversion to communism had involved not the hauling about of platforms, or even of a party card, but immediate recognition of his command of ‘theory’ and pre-eminence in articulating it. In this he was a harbinger of things to come.

Though Strachey represented a small but prominent grouping of older converts, for the most part this was a movement of overlapping student cohorts, born roughly between the years 1910–25 and radicalised by world depression, the advance of fascism, the intellectual appeals of Marxism and the fascination of socialist construction in Russia. In some ways their motivations recalled the ‘consciousness of sin’ which stirred in late Victorian social reformers. Mass unemployment was in both cases a catalyst, and the eye-opening effect of the Hunger Marchers' arrival in Cambridge in 1934 may be compared with the sensational impact of the unemployed riots of 1886. If in the earlier period guilt was mixed with fear, in its 1930s’ variant it was combined with the doom of a condemned class and a belief in the redemptory agency of the workers—something which had no Victorian equivalent and could never have acquired its potency without the example of the USSR. It was for these middle-class converts of the 1930s that joining the party was most likely to be identified with the uprooting of the individual from traditional relationships and patterns of authority. Peter Cadogan, whose conversion took place in 1942, described it in his party autobiography as ‘get[ting] out of one class skin and into another’.

Shedding one’s skin could take a number of forms. Among prominent intellectual recruits of the early 1930s, several moved to working-class districts, including Christopher Caudwell, David Guest and Clive and Noreen Branson. No doubt they were unaware of following the example of Palme Dutt, who ten years earlier, like Caudwell and the Bransons, had also lived in Battersea, where he put in an ineffectual attendance at his local branch of the General and Municipal Workers’ Union. When the literary critic Alick West moved to Brixton, it was precisely because Dutt advised him to make a break with his middle-class surroundings.

At one level, the aim of such relocations was to make commitment more effective. Felicia Browne was a sometime contemporary of Clive Branson’s at the Slade School, becoming in 1936 the first Briton, and
only British woman, to die as a combatant in Spain. Despite having an independent income and a studio in the country, she had previously taken a job as a tea shop scullion, where she described her task as that of ‘getting the girls to fight...to change unspeakable conditions’. 

Though such commitments were deeply felt, not infrequently a sense of discomfort or delinquency regarding one’s social pigmention can also be detected in such migrations. G abriel Carritt, son of the Oxford philosopher E. F. Carritt, adopted the name ‘Bill’, dropped his aitches and on conducting his first party activities in Clay Cross remembered trying to ‘talk like the Derbyshire miners’. ‘I used to imitate, I used to want to be working class. I couldn’t bear the fact that anybody should know what my background was...’ 

T hough Alick West did not disguise his background in this overt way, his party autobiography is exceptional in its suffusion with self-criticism in which ‘bourgeois influences’ and his ‘defects in...personal character’ are indistinguishable. ‘I am reserved, contemplative rather than active, acquiescent rather than combative, and prone to compromise’, he wrote:

Though his has made me inclined to separate an ‘innermost self’ from myself as a Party member, and this has made me susceptible to idealism and mysticism. I have tried to overcome this...but I am still liable to the temptation to withdraw into ‘myself’—that is to dodge the class struggle.

... I have not carried out my theoretical work with sufficiently clear consciousness that it must be part of the struggle to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat and must be guided by the needs of the struggle, not by ‘my’ own wishes. I have thought too much and too ideallistically about the culture of the past, and not enough and with too little enthusiasm about the new culture of Communism.

This sense of a self requiring inverted commas is most famously depicted in the novels of E dward U pward, like Carritt an intimate of the Auden-Spender-Isherwood circle, where party membership is again depicted as a way of casting off the inherent ‘social inferiority’ of the bourgeois and bringing the promise of release or self-denial. ‘Membership of the Party’, pondered Upward’s fictional alter ego hopefully, ‘transcended class differences between the members’.

T hough this was primarily a phenomenon of the 1930s, with the CP GB’s turn to the factories in the late 1940s there remained members prepared to take on new class roles if called on to do so. Some were refused the party’s permission to do so, like the ICI economist thought likely to arouse the suspicions of both workers and management on the shopfloor. 

A nother volunteer, a Summerhill and Cambridge-educated technical clerk in a radio factory, admitted to boredom at work and ‘undue humility due to consciousness of privileged background’, though he took satisfaction from his work in the electricians’ union. 

B etty Dowsett had broken ties with her father, a fascist-leaning businessman, to pay her own way through university. Qualifying as a doctor in 1943, she subsequently worked at the Medical Research Council before being sacked on suspected political grounds in 1949. Whereas for many middle-class communists, careers such as medicine provided a vehicle for the ideals that drew them to communism, Dowsett’s now took a more distinctive turn and in 1950 she became a bus conductor.

M ore singular still was the fact that she married her driver and recruited him to the party. Generally speaking, invisible fissures within the communist counter-community were marked by the relative infrequency of inter-marriage across the social divide. M ore specifically, it was rare for professional men to marry working-class women, although not uncommonly male activists and functionaries did marry women from middle-class backgrounds—a phenomenon not peculiar to the communist party. 

S ent to work among middle-class contacts of the popular front period, C arritt’s two marriages were socially compatible ones; and while West had agonised over whether falling in love with a non-party member represented ‘deserting to the enemy’, he was not finally deterred and ended up dividing his time between Hampstead and the Vicarage Flat, Cookham, with the positive result—he added enigmatically—of becoming ‘less susceptible to idealism and mysticism’.

D owsett’s commitment, by comparison, was unconditional. Where communism was once her ‘hobby’, she now described it as the central purpose of her life, specifically discountenancing association with the middle class of which she had once formed part.

Almost to the end, there remained an element of ‘donkey-jacketism’ about student communists, to say nothing of competitors to their left. 

O n the other hand, there were from the start those who sought to reconcile communist commitments with their existing sense of self and social function, and this was to become more characteristic of the larger wave of intellectual recruits during the party’s heyday. F rom as early as 1922, the Cambridge economist Maurice Dobb quietly maintained his own academic position while fighting the CP GB’s corner within the Plebs League. H is Cambridge contemporary, the crystallographer J. D. Bernal, also joined the party after graduating in 1923.
However, Bernal encountered such suspicion of intellectuals that he appears to have lapsed in 1927, when he returned to the Cavendish Laboratory, and no other communist academic is known to us from the 1920s.  

The adhesion to the party of Hyman Levy in the early 1930s was thus a significant straw in the wind. Born in 1889, Levy was a professor in mathematics at Imperial College and a Fabian socialist from as early as 1910. Active in the National Union of Scientific Workers, he had brought an expert outlook to the Labour Party as chair successively of its education and science advisory committees and it was not to be expected that he would be content with performing Morton’s menial tasks. Joining the CPGB in about 1931 or 1932, it must have been partly on Levy’s initiative that proposals were then advanced within the party for a ‘Section of Intellectual Workers’, modelled on professional workers’ organisations in the USSR but also claiming a parallel with the CPGB’s factory cells. Apparently proposing only ‘to do what every Party member should do—to apply the theses of the CC and the CI in the place or sphere of his own particular work’, the spirit of the proposals was more akin to a Fabian conception of vocational organisation and they were immediately quashed by Dutt as the keeper of party orthodoxy. Dutt’s insistence that there was ‘no special work and role of Communists from the bourgeois intellectual strata’ perfectly expressed the conceptions which had hitherto guided the party, and were to guide Dutt all his life. Nevertheless, it was on the basis of what Dutt described as the ‘segregation’ of the intellectuals from the working-class struggle that the future development of this work was to take place.

While Bernal and a few contemporaries now made their way into the fold, the first real sign of such ‘segregation’ was the emergence in the 1930s of a distinct communist students’ movement, to which the later innovations of professional groups and graduate branches provided a sort of collective career development. Hitherto there had been no attempt to sustain the sort of students’ organisation from which the CPGB had drawn much of its first cohort of intellectual recruits. In 1932, however, the party established a national student secretariat and the first communist student magazine for a decade. Within six months student membership had more than doubled, to around 150; and although this sector was obviously uniquely susceptible to the party’s fluctuating fortunes, there were still over 600 student communists even as general recruitment began to falter after the war. Where practicable, as in London, student communists were at first attached to party locals, often as ‘instructors’. However, Pollitt claimed never to have liked the idea and by the late 1930s there existed a distinct and well-defined communist student milieu which was to provide a significant proportion of the next generation of communist leaders. Already during the war, student recruits like Betty Matthews and Malcolm MacEwen were given responsibilities as district organisers which at one time would virtually have needed certification from the Lenin School. By the 1960s fully a sixth of the party executive were products of this 1930s’ student generation, including key figures like James K lugmann, head of education and first editor of Marxism Today; George Matthews, former assistant secretary to Pollitt and editor of the Daily Worker; and the Spanish veteran Bill Alexander, who had succeeded Matthews as assistant secretary. Though Pollitt ruled out Matthews as his own successor because he was ‘middle class’, by 1965 even the post of national industrial organiser had been entrusted to a former lawyer of the same generation, the Canadian-born Bert Ramelson.

Thanks to images of the Cambridge spy ring, these student communists have been identified in several accounts as a sort of gilded youth. Richard Crossman (Winchester and New College) called them ‘the golden boys’, while in Osbert Lancaster’s Draynefleete it is Gillaume de Vere T ipple who re-emerges in the 1930s as Bill T ipple, secretary of the World Congress of International Poets in Defence of Peace. Specifically with regard to Oxford, Brian Harrison has depicted the student left as pitting grammar-school social democrats against ‘the public-school undergraduate in revolt’. Neal Wood has also described the CPGB’s 1930s intellectual recruits as having been to the best public schools, ‘Eton figuring prominently among them’. There is unquestionably an element of mythologising at work here. It is true that Oxbridge recruits to communism included names familiar on the liberal left like Carritt, Simon, Toynbee, Cornford and Haden Guest. A name like Hovell-T hurlow-Cumming-Bruce, Cambridge communist and future high court judge, also stands out a little conspicuously among the lists of party comrades. Nevertheless, using a research method based upon the recognition of such well-known names, Wood’s account inevitably exaggerated their significance. With student recruits running to many hundreds, his haul of just seven Old Etonians, of whom only three can be identified as actually joining the CPGB, was certainly a slender basis on which to call them ‘the most stalwart of communists’. In any case, the constant turnover of the student branches means that generalisations are more than usually hazardous. Both Eric Hobsbawm and Denis Healey, Oxbridge entrants of 1936, comment that in their period the public-school component was giving way to the grammar
were liable to be overridden with a scrawled communication: ‘A crisis has
illuminated by a single naked light bulb, one’s previous arrangements
in Spain, tributes to him recorded that ‘far more “normal” young men
bohemian to outside observers’.163 Almost from the start, however, the
and still the pre-war Oxford Labour Club could seem ‘needlessly
normal and relaxed, was largely one of grammar-school endeavour.
schools, and the ethos of student communism, which seemed to them so
staid’, ‘puritanical’ or ‘respectable’ to describe their university days, and
for academic values. Student interviewees used words like ‘normal’,
were said to have enjoined on communists diligence in their studies, and
even into the 1960s experimentation in dress or sexual mores was
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Further in the 1930s, its adherents had enjoyed a reputation for oddity,
and still the pre-war Oxford Labour Club could seem ‘needlessly
bohemian to outside observers’.163 Almost from the start, however, the
rejection of convention tended to be associated with a Lenin-like asceti-
cism and seriousness of purpose. David Guest’s rooms at Trinity were
described as absolutely bare except for a bookcase, piano, portrait of
Lenin and mouldering piece of cheese.164 Arriving at John Cornford’s,
illuminated by a single naked light bulb, one’s previous arrangements
were liable to be overridden with a scrawled communication: ‘A crisis has
arisen in the town.’165

By the time that Cornford gave his life in the crisis that really did arise
in Spain, tributes to him recorded that ‘far more “normal” young men
were coming towards Communism’, not in revolt against ‘social conven-
tion or cultural emptiness’, still less, as Philip Toynbee put it, to avoid
changing their shirts with greater regularity.166 Increasingly, the model
communist student was like the model non-communist student only
better. ‘Every communist a good student’, was a tolerable slogan from the
1930s. ‘Join Soc. Soc. and get a 2:1, join Comm. Soc. and get a First’,
from the 1940s, was just insufferable—though the communist-controlled
University Labour Federation did also propound a ‘sense of communal
responsibility’ for study in preference to the mere ‘selfish, competitive
struggle for coveted “Firsts”’.167 Either way, variously ‘Harry’ or Lenin
were said to have enjoined on communists diligence in their studies, and
where these were neglected it was out of political zeal, not a disregard
for academic values. Student interviewees used words like ‘normal’,
‘staid’, ‘puritanical’ or ‘respectable’ to describe their university days, and
even into the 1960s experimentation in dress or sexual mores was
frowned upon. A Liverpool student on an all-party delegation to the US
consul was even mistaken for the Young Conservative.168

One result of the shift to work among students themselves was the
weakening of ties between the student branches and other communists.
Early enthusiasms for agitating ‘in the town’ gave way to a more self-
contained existence with moments of real friction with the ‘town’
branches.169 In Oxford in the early 1950s students did try to support
industrial activities with the town branch, ‘who as you can imagine
thought we were a bunch of wankers’.170 Organisationally, the separation
of branches meant that there was little to offset the lack of continuity
between student cohorts, and after the membership haemorrhage of
1956 the Oxford student branch had to be rebuilt from scratch.171 It also
meant that habits and expectations were established of political associa-
tion mainly with one’s professional and middle-class contacts. Cyril
Claydon described it as an ‘artificial’ existence and recalled the ‘terrible
strain’ he experienced on wanting to work with the proletarian
‘tough nuts’ of the YCL.172 Twelve years after he graduated, Hobsbawm’s
party autobiography described his feeling ‘rather cut off from the masses,
and even from ordinary party work’ through his concentration on profes-
sional spheres of work and he mentioned a desire ‘to have more to do
with factory workers’.173 Conversely, communists like Dorothy and
Edward Thompson did become intensely involved in local campaigning
activities, and it is no doubt relevant that Dorothy Thompson at
Cambridge had been very much involved with the town branch, on hous-
ing and other local issues.174 Again, the difference of six or seven years
could make for quite contrasting experiences.
At least the blatant device of a so-called ‘middle-class branch’, reportedly attempted in Edinburgh in the 1930s, does not appear to have been replicated elsewhere, and graduating students normally found their way into ordinary residential branches.\textsuperscript{175} Indeed, in some areas middle-class members not only actively participated but set the dominant tone for such branches and provided their meeting venues.\textsuperscript{176} A national level too, with the proliferation of national party committees after the war, these too were serviced largely on a voluntary basis from within the London region. On a 1957 listing of members of the party’s international sub-committees, only two of the sixty-three names listed had addresses outside what is now Greater London. Functionaries and professional workers predominated.\textsuperscript{177}

However, while many middle-class members were absorbed into ordinary party activities, those with professional commitments managed to carve out the separate spheres of work and social contact that Dutt had so reprobated. To some extent, this represented a continuation of the functional enclaves of research and publicity already identifiable with the LRD and Herald groups of the party’s formative years. Even in the 1920s, Cambridge graduate Philip Spratt contrasted the ‘pleasant intimacy with a like-minded group’ he experienced at the LRD with his ‘futile’ and ‘uncongenial’ party branch.\textsuperscript{178} Though superficially counteracted by Williams’s appointment as LRD secretary, the department’s Fabian social ethos was restored with the recruitment of an outstanding 1930s’ cohort including Margaret Heinemann and Noreen Branson. ‘The LRD was actually the best thing that could have happened to me... because I didn’t have to pretend to be a worker’, Heinemann recalled. ‘I could put my talents at the service of the working-class movement without either being idealistically workerist about it or feeling that it was up to me to tell the workers what they ought to do.’\textsuperscript{179}

As for the Daily Worker, to the extent that it relied on the ad hoc enthusiasms that had sustained the Herald, it was a target of suspicion both to the Comintern and to those like Dutt who were distrustful of professional journalists.\textsuperscript{180} Even in the Class Against Class period, its irreverent columnist ‘Bejay’ (Bernard Boothroyd) was a devotee of Douglas’s Social Credit theories who described himself as a communist but appears not to have joined the party.\textsuperscript{181} Nor at first did the popular cartoonist ‘Gabriel’, who joined the paper in 1936, when a somewhat detached relationship with party structures was becoming rather characteristic of the ‘literary café-crawlers’ denounced by the Comintern.\textsuperscript{182} Knowing and irreverent—‘the lower organs of the party must penetrate the backward sections of the masses’, they lampooned Inprecorr—these communist journalists mixed freely in Fleet Street pubs, from which Claud Cockburn would emerge barely standing and yet miraculously capable of producing copy to order, while the novelist Patrick Hamilton would drop in during the long, dry afternoons, pursuing his liaison with the paper’s telephonist.\textsuperscript{183} ‘Gone to seed and large supporter of brewers’ dividends’, was how an old schoolfriend described Reg Bishop, another of the telephonist’s admirers and a passionate devotee of the music hall as well as Stalin’s Russia.\textsuperscript{184} Close to the centre of things, journalists on the Worker took little part in local activities and were even somewhat contemptuous of them.\textsuperscript{185} A typist employed there after the war expressed dismay at the prevalent cynicism, which was described even by the paper’s editor as a ‘deadly tendency’: ‘“Clever” derogatory remarks about the Party, about the type of paper which the Daily Worker is, about the workers in their struggles, have no place in our paper.’\textsuperscript{186}

After the lifting of the ban on the Worker in 1942, with male working-class activists committed to industry and the forces, the paper’s increasing professionalism was associated with a younger, more middle-class and often female cohort of journalists. Joining the paper from the Sheffield Star, Florence Keyworth was shocked to discover that nearly all of its women journalists were from distinctly privileged backgrounds, whether business, literary or professional. ‘Cradled in books’, as the Worker advertised her, Sheila Lynd still lived next door to her parents, who were well-known Hampstead littérateurs. Angela Tuckett was not only a solicitor but a known Hampstead littérateur. ‘They didn’t mean to be intimidating but they were to me, just by being upper class’, she went on. ‘I can remember that on Monday mornings she would ring up her friends and they would discuss the Saturday game, you know: “That was a splen-did goal you got on Saturday in the second half, wasn’t it?” I would sit there listening to this and think, “Where am I? Is this the Daily Worker?”’\textsuperscript{187}

Corresponding more directly with the growing specialisation of trade union work was the network of party professional groups which in the late 1940s came under the aegis of the new National Cultural Committee. By this time, there were eleven of these groups, including architects, psychiatrists, biologists and the legendary historians’ group, which, in addition to developing an outstanding canon of marxist scholarship, included local branches and a teachers’ section.\textsuperscript{188} If the historians were left largely unmolested by party officials, the teachers’ group itself has been characterised as a veritable ‘party within a party’, with its own conferences, journal and almost open disregard for the party central
authority. Comprising those regarding themselves as ‘Teacher Communists’, its sectarian and somewhat traditionalist policies forced dissenting members to ‘leave’ the group, rather as one might have left the party itself. Even G. T. C. Giles, the party’s most venerable educational reformer, a genuine old Etonian and a sometime NUT president, transferred to other party activities.

Formally speaking the professional groups were not an alternative to ordinary party activities. As already noted, E. P. Thompson, then more identified with the writers’ group than the historians, was an energetic peace campaigner and very active member of the party’s Yorkshire district committee. More exclusive by their very nature were the staff or graduate branches established in the larger universities, usually comprising both staff and postgraduates and showing tendencies to ‘independent-mindedness’ not unmixed with collective self-esteem. ‘I don’t know if we thought we knew better than other people’, Dorothy Wedderburn reflected, and traces clearly remained even within the party of a ‘Cambridge’ worldview of being surrounded by ‘barbarians’. Immediately after the war, the club-like ‘Cambridge Graduate Communist Party’ was established, not on a functional basis but admitting any Cambridge graduate, wherever located, and any individual ‘for some reason considered suitable by the Committee’.

Chairman of the branch was the archetypal Cambridge communist, Maurice Dobb, whose long tenures in both party and academy convey the resilience of both forms of socialisation. After a brief attraction to guild socialism, Dobb had joined the CPGB shortly before graduating in 1922, and after an interlude at the LSE spent his entire life in Cambridge, being made a Fellow of Trinity in 1948. Initially a member of the party’s London West Central branch—a very early variant of the ‘middle-class’ branch—Dobb was for some years involved with the working-class movement through the Plebs League, where he upheld communist positions against now discarded notions like workers’ control. Never a charismatic figure, he did not play the role of a G. D. H. Cole or Harold Laski towards his students. On the other hand, within the CPGB he defended the validity of academic study even in the unsympathetic context of the 1920s, and in the early 1930s was one of the movers behind the idea for a professional workers’ section.

Like Fox, Dobb is invariably remembered as modest, self-effacing and ‘in a very old fashioned sense of the word, a gentleman’. For one academic colleague, he personified a ‘generation of English Marxists who felt that independence of mind and radical thought was not incompatible with cultivation and good manners’. However, manners in a Cambridge context may have had a different significance from the egalitarian etiquette for which Fox was remembered even by the Sunday Worker office boy. Privately, he can be found complaining in the accents of a Waugh or Sitwell of the ‘hordes’ arriving for post-war vacation courses: ‘school teachers & fat old women from the Midlands in round black hats & immense waddling bottoms, presumably to do with the WEA’. Publicly, he was also one of the first British communists to celebrate Bolshevism not so much as a workers’ state as a managerial revolution, ‘a leaven working upon [the] inert mass’, and supplying the drive and efficiency previously identified in Russia with the ‘foreign businessman’. The somewhat conservative historian of inter-war Cambridge takes obvious pleasure in noting how at the Cambridge Union in 1925 Dobb struck ‘just the right note’ in heralding the ascendency in Russia of an aristocracy of intellect, and he described its increased initiative in terms recalling his Charterhouse schooldays: ‘as if in a public school the spirit of the playing field were transported into the classroom—a rare eventuality which is only found where the great master makes himself felt as “one of themselves”’. With its several virtues of industry, determination and athleticism—Dobb particularly enjoyed the spectacle of Soviet sports events—the vision had something of the vicarious masculinity of the Victorian social reformer.

For many communist intellectuals, though not Dobb, 1956 was a watershed. To some extent the high intellectual component in the ensuing exodus from the party was a matter of generation, for those who left were overwhelmingly recruits from the post-1934 period among whom intellectuals were most heavily represented. Accepting that caveat, however, there was also a specific dimension to the disillusionment of professional workers. Already in their specialised fields of knowledge these had already had to confront the disappointment of expectations in their own particular fields, exactly as trade unionists sometimes did in respect of conditions and working practices. As the journalist Alison Macleod later put it, ‘everybody knew that in their own particular field what Russia was doing was no good’.

Some, like many teachers, or the composer Alan Bush, were prepared to moderate or abandon progressive postures increasingly at odds with Stalinist precepts. Others, like visiting architects, excused the obvious Soviet shortcomings on grounds of backwardness or cultural difference. A third response was to leave the party, either generalising from particular insights to a broader disillusionment, or simply extricating oneself from the tensions between the two. Already posed for scientists and musicians by the Lysenko affair and Soviet composers’ controversy,
this produced the most significant withdrawal from the party prior to 1956 in the shape of the geneticist and party executive member J.B.S. Haldane. ‘I believe that wholly unjustifiable attacks have been made on my profession’, Haldane commented, ‘and one of the most important lessons which I have learned as a Marxist is the duty of supporting my fellow-workers’.202 Professional concerns were also strongly evident among the journalists, writers and historians who left in such numbers in 1956, and who were all professionally concerned with the representation of the social and political truths. ‘The fact is that historians were inevitably forced to confront the situation not only as private persons and communist militants but... in their professional capacity’, Hobsbawm comments.203 Similarly, if the Daily Worker lost a third of its editorial staff—in contrast to the lack of defections by party officials of similar standing—that again reflected professional concerns symbolised by the suppression of Peter Fryer’s dispatches from Budapest during the Soviet intervention there.204 Fryer himself described the issue as whether communist journalists were to be allowed to provide ‘honest reporting’ or else misrepresent what they saw in the party’s interest.205 The irony was that the CPGB itself had urged itself to provide ‘honest reporting’ or else misrepresent what they saw in the party’s interest.205 The irony was that the CPGB itself had urged its members professional standards of conduct, and that Fryer, like many others, owed to it the development of skills and aptitudes which in the end were incompatible with its disciplines. We shall see that the development of effective leadership skills provided the party with precisely the same dilemma.

Parties within the party

In his study of French communist intellectuals, H.D. Hazareesingh comments that the exposure of deep divisions within the PCF in the late 1970s is inexplicable within the framework of a monolithic understanding of the party. Specifically in relation to Annie Kriegel, he points out that the ‘functional traditions, affective symbols, and foundational values’ holding together her model of the homogenous political community ‘could not suddenly have imploded’ in the way she was forced to argue.206 In Britain, the exposure of rending differences within the CPGB during the 1980s holds a similar lesson. Equally, however, it would be wrong to supplant such a framework with a teleology of division, reading back the cleavages of the CPGB’s final years and depicting the party as if never more than a collection of tendencies. When the party descended into internecine warfare, the unexpectedness of such a development was accompanied in many cases by a sense of utter bewilderment and betrayal. Arthur Utting, a building union official, was expelled in 1984 after some four decades of membership. For him the sense of belonging we associate with the party as counter-community was matched only by his incredulity to find himself put outside of it. ‘People would say who knew me: “Well, for Christ’s sake, Arthur, how can the party expel you? You are the party!”’ It was a hurt that could never fully be repaired. ‘I would never have left the party, no, no, no. Never at any time would I have ever left the party in my life. Never.’207

Even so, it is clear that these divisions represented not just the breakdown of a common party culture and discipline but the establishment by the 1970s of distinct and semi-formalised sub-cultures within the CPGB. Brian Behan, another building union activist, described the party of the 1950s as ‘about ten communist parties’.208 Behan had in mind the lawyers, the ‘fucking gays’, the cultural committee. Even within his own industry, disputes between craft, general and industrial unions, to say nothing of architects, building technicians or housing campaigners, were as likely to be replicated within the CPGB as overcome by the higher collective consciousness it represented. Faced with differences over the proposed amalgamation of the building unions, Utting was told by R-amelson, the party’s industrial organiser, that the party would not interfere: ‘No, the party line is determined by the lads in each union. They determine their own line.’209

In other industries, like the clothing trades, tensions might run horizontally, between the party’s union officials and rank-and-file activists, and the nominal oversight of the relevant advisory committee effectively be ignored.210 In any case, the ‘advisories’ themselves were of an increasingly sectionalised character, symbolised by the degeneration of the local government and social services advisories into what were effectively vehicles of the party’s NALGO and NUPE factions.211 Hardly disciplined in the Leninist sense, the CPGB was less the coordinating centre of an alliance strategy than an alliance in itself; and, whereas in its heyday the specialisation of activities had been subject to the common acceptance of the party’s overriding political authority, increasingly after 1956 the framework ceased to hold. As defining issues provoked sustained internal contestation, the old mantra was disregarded that a decision once arrived at was universally binding. With defections always outnumbering new adhesions, the hand of party discipline, when at last it was raised against stalwarts like Utting, produced not a cleansing but a bloodletting.

It is intrinsic to the analysis presented here that the loss of party cohesion cannot be explained by any single set of alignments or cleavages. Gender, generation and changing constructions of political authority all played a part in differentiating reform-minded ‘Euros’ from traditionalist...
‘Tankies’. Moreover, and for this very reason, Euros on some issues were sometimes Tankies on others, or else occupied a variety of positions between the two. Still, there is no escaping how often Eurocommunism was identified with ‘academic’ or middle-class communists, and the alternative perspective of ‘class politics’ with ‘trade union comrades’. Though grossly over-simplified for political effect, the same distinctions can to some degree be traced noiselessly subverting the structures of the party over the preceding decades.

On the one hand, as far back as 1956 a wavering on fundamentals was associated with ‘intellectuals’, and sometimes the university branches. On the other hand, the phenomenon had become increasingly familiar of the trade union communist reluctant to prioritise party responsibilities. In 1959, the Scottish NUM activist Andrew Clark admitted not taking seriously enough his role on the party’s Scottish committee and sometimes not attending ‘when with very little effort I could have arranged to do so’. This did not prevent him being elevated to the party executive the following decade. Back in the 1940s, Horner and Moffat were repeatedly returned to the party’s executive committee as its leading mining comrades, though their attendance was sporadic and in 1939 their ‘many other commitments’ had not even permitted them to sit on the national mining committee. Though a parliamentary candidate and member of the CPGB’s London district committee, railwayman Tom Ahern was another who described how industrial activists like himself became ‘buried’ in the unions, as ‘specialists’ in their own particular field of work. If distinctions were made between trade unionists holding a party card and genuine communists at work in the unions, this was because effective activism or career progression in some unions or localities was largely dependent on this formal party affiliation. Even where members did get involved in their local branch, as the London woodworker Stan Martin did, it could be regarded ‘almost as…a social group that you did out of work’.

At one level, this was a source of possible fragmentation. Jan Schling could hardly have been other than a Eurocommunist, for his father Otto Schling was one of the victims of the Slansky show trial of 1952. Until his rehabilitation in the 1960s his children were therefore brought up in the national mining committee. Though a parliamentary candidate and member of the CPGB’s L ondon district committee, railwayman Tom Ahern was another who described how industrial activists like himself became ‘buried’ in the unions, as ‘specialists’ in their own particular field of work. If distinctions were made between trade unionists holding a party card and genuine communists at work in the unions, this was because effective activism or career progression in some unions or localities was largely dependent on this formal party affiliation. Even where members did get involved in their local branch, as the London woodworker Stan Martin did, it could be regarded ‘almost as…a social group that you did out of work’.

The part these cleavages played in the divisions of the 1980s is difficult
to underestimate. In September 1982, the CPGB’s monthly journal Marxism Today, then emerging as the standard-bearer of the ‘Euros’, presented as its cover feature a critical assessment of the USSR by the dissident Marxist Roy Medvedev. Naturally, it provoked controversy, including an official Soviet rejoinder. Nevertheless, a much larger postbag was generated by another article in the same issue alleging a ‘crisis of legitimacy’ within the unions partly brought about by the ‘perks and fiddles’ of a working-class elite. Either spontaneously, or else revealing informal networks overstepping the vertical lines of party democracy, objections flooded in and a rebuttal in the Morning Star by the party’s industrial organiser marked the first really public breach in the heart of the party apparatus. Symbolically, the article’s author was a Liverpool University sociologist on secondment to the other world of the TGWU. One of his critics from within that union wondered whether he would now be given the opportunity ‘to write a similar piece on the way in which the sociology departments of Universities, particularly those in the North West, have created and fostered undue pessimism among their students’. Probably he had in mind the economists at Manchester University who within the CPGB had actively been contesting the rationality of simple wage militancy and free collective bargaining.

Though the intensity of the divisions varied, almost everywhere the communist party community was shown, like every other community, to be riven with unseen fault lines. Birmingham, more than most of the examples we have considered, had seemed the model of a more inclusive party culture, with no dominant occupational grouping or pronounced sense of social distance. Members of its distinguished university branch contributed actively to wider party activities, encouraged by the fact that their foremost representative, the classicist George Thomson, had held tenures in both the party and university dating from before a separate university branch existed. Resistant to revisionist tendencies—he eventually became a Maoist—Thomson led the way in taking local and factory group classes, and at home provided a setting for socially inclusive party gatherings at which his wife Katharine Thomson entertained on the spinet. ‘The life of many of our branches and districts is pitifully narrow and unimaginative’, he wrote in a mission statement for party intellectuals, ‘it is for us to broaden it and make it more attractive’. Despite the echo of Toynbee Hall, and the ‘bollocking’ Thomson used to give his factory class members if they turned up unprepared, Stan Martin recalled never being made to feel uncomfortable in such situations: ‘[they] really did treat you as an equal, and in some cases you were more than an equal’.

The crossing of customary boundaries produced a number of more or less agreeable images. One is of the Birmingham University historian, Sam Lilley, reporting back to the motor industry shop stewards who had sent him to report on Soviet automation. Another is of the booking of local reggae bands for the Star Social Club by Frank Watters, former Scots miner and epitome of the CPGB’s traditional proletarianism. Also dating in the 1970s was a well-publicised campaign bringing together building workers and conservationists to defend the city’s Victorian post office from developers. Its moving spirit was the UCATT secretary, part-time rock-and-roll singer and future ‘trendy’ CPGB industrial organiser, Pete Carter. It was this milieu that Avis Hutt described as her family, in contrast to the experiences she had of the party in London.

Like Orwell’s England, this family too was nevertheless a site of tensions, inequalities and battles for control. Arriving in Birmingham as the CPGB’s city organiser in 1968, Watters became involved in a gentle tug-of-war with the party district over the nurturing of young activists like the Coventry YCLer Graham Stevenson. Regardless of the party’s claims, Watters wanted activists like Stevenson in a ‘TGWU factory’ to secure, as a number of them did, their future union careers. At the same time, he was increasingly hostile to the middle-class functionaries for whom the success of his union ‘stable’ meant coming to the fore in the party district. On one occasion he literally struck a blow against the Eurocommunist district secretary who told him he was ‘finished’. Perhaps more revealingly, when Watters’s daughter joined the YCL, once the very symbol of the party family, she thought it best not to inform her father, who disapproved not only of its politics but of its social mores. Though by this time it was possibly just the memory to which he clung, Watters, like Utting, insisted that he could never have brought himself to leave the CPGB. In 1991, when the party dissolved itself, he joined the Communist Party of Scotland.
CHAPTER 3
CULTS OF LEADERSHIP

‘We are the Party of Lenin, Stalin and Dimitrov, and thousands of other revolutionary heroes. No other Party can produce such revolutionary giants, leaders and heroes as these.’ Thus ran Harry Pollitt’s report to the thirteenth CPGB congress in 1935, under a title—Harry Pollitt Speaks—suggesting that in Britain this was the Party of Pollitt too.1 Taken to extremes in countries like France as well as Russia, this cult of the leader is usually regarded as the one of defining characteristics of Stalinism. In older accounts, figures like Pollitt were even said to exercise a ‘sort of absolute power’ within their own parties, advertised in a manner ‘closely akin to the worship of Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini’.2 More recently, Stalin’s authorisation of local cults in the mid-1930s has been seen as a stimulus to collective emulation and self-esteem as well as a mechanism for internal discipline.3 Communist cults of leadership thus appear as both representation and reinforcement of a culture of centralised control. As Harry M. McShane observed on leaving the CPGB in 1953: ‘If one opposes policy, he is often met with the remark: “That is an attack on Comrade Pollitt”.’4

But leadership for a communist party was a double-edged sword. While formally the most hierarchical of organisations, its effectiveness depended on members not only rallying behind their leaders but demonstrating active leadership qualities towards the ‘unthinking masses’ beyond. As the ‘leading Party of the working class’, according to the CPGB’s seminal 1922 organisation report, there was no room within it for a passive ‘rank and file’.5 Two years later a call for new recruits stated: ‘The Communist Party is to the class war what the corps of officers is to ordinary military war. A Communist Party member is, or should be, an officer in the class war—a leader of the workers in all their struggles.’6 Maurice Dobb chose the analogy not of a sheepdog marshalling sheep but of a wolf or coyote leading his pack, while the scientist J. B. S. Haldane preferred the Webbian notion of ‘experts in the art of leadership’.7

Of course, metaphors of military derivation implied a steely centralised control, the object of the party’s early Bolshevisation. Nevertheless, in an organisation whose members were neither grouped in barracks nor subject to courts martial, the wider cultivation of leadership attributes inevitably gave rise to tensions as well as a spirit of emulation. Militating against its oligarchical forms, the communists, in Haldane’s words, sought not a Michelsian ideal of ‘members…content to vote and subscribe’ but ‘active politicians’, drawn to communism to ‘influence history’ according to their own aspirations.8 Asked in which situations he had taken on leadership roles, one communist replied: ‘In every situation… I was never anything but a leader.’9 Another, a schoolboy recruit of 1934, was cited as saying that there was no rank and file: ‘[it] meant that every communist must be a leader, and you don’t wait for what the leaders say, you work out what you’ve got to do and you do it’.10 Thinly scattered, to the detriment of party discipline, it was on the independent initiative of Pollitt’s thousands of other revolutionary heroes that the CPGB’s effectiveness in large part depended.

The diffusion of leadership roles under a centralised command structure was one central paradox of communist organisation. Another was the perception of the leader as the creature rather than the animator of the party. As Pennetier and Pudal have shown, the ideal-type communist leader lacked any personal history or individual traits suggesting an identity or political trajectory distinct from that of the party, of whose collective cult any individual was merely a representation.11 It is for this reason that the personalised ‘isms’ littering the pages of communist polemic—Trotskyism, Titoism, Browderism, ‘Hornerism’—were nearly always intended as anathemas. In a positive sense, only the founding fathers Marx and Lenin were lifted above the party by the same device, and in Britain at least even ‘Stalinist’ was primarily used as a term of opprobrium and dissociation by the party’s opponents. As one party branch put it in the aftermath of the Khrushchev revelations: ‘The cult of the individual is subordinate to the cult of the infallible party; is indeed, a function of the cult of the infallible party.’12

Communist leadership cults were therefore distinctive. Rluitually they celebrated modesty, even in the case of Stalin, and at his own dictation. For leaders of national parties, the tension was nevertheless a real one. Partly, this was because of their client-like relationship to Stalin himself, confirmed in the CPGB’s case by Pollitt’s removal as party leader for resisting his instructions at the start of the war. What is equally instructive, however, is that Pollitt’s moral authority for British communists depended at least as much on this legendary act of self-abnegation, when
he is supposed to have stoically recommenced work in the shipyards, as on any supposed display of arbitrary power.13 'You must follow; you must', said one of Pollitt's subordination of self to party, while a former Labour activist joined the CPGB at this point, because 'a party which would force this upon its leadership was strong and wise'.14 In defiance of Michels's classic formulation, it was never 'Le Parti c'est Moi', but the other way round.15

Even this does not resolve the paradox, however, for with the seeming vindication of Pollitt's original stance on the war, it was his initial act of insubordination which for many communists 'saved the soul of the Party' and endowed Pollitt himself with an independent stature unattainable simply as the bearer of the party line. It also contributed to his credibility with a wider constituency: as early as the 1940 Labour Party conference, a union delegate and parliamentary candidate took pains to distinguish Pollitt—'one of the best fellows I have ever met in my life'—from the hostility he otherwise felt for the communists: 'he is in the wrong party'.16 This then was the insoluble conundrum, for it was precisely these individual accretions of political capital that gave the CPGB an influence belying its formal status, while undermining the total authority of the institution usually identified as the hallmark of Stalinism. From Pollitt himself, down to the most localised of his revolutionary heroes, this as much as anything explains the discrepancy between the formal and the effective in the party's internal relationships and power structures.

**Lenin, Stalin, Dimitrov**

Even before Stalin, Lenin's was the founding cult, arising as if spontaneously on his death in 1924. To Trotsky, so often portrayed as resisting it, Lenin was the Master and the Guide, Immortal, incomparable and irreplaceable. 'The Party... remains an orphan... but we give thanks to History, which made us contemporaries of Lenin... let us be worthy of him who has taught us.'17 Pollitt, who thought these 'wonderful' sentiments, voiced them at rallies to the airs of the Russian funeral march.18 Tom Bell echoed them directly, saluting Lenin as 'guide, teacher and master' and singling out Trotsky as his 'inseparable' co-worker.19 Privately, Palme Dutt described how immediately Lenin's death made 'the whole fight feel very much lonelier', while at the first CPGB national children's conference delegates were told how 'Lenin, even in his convalescent state refused nourishing food in order that it should go to the children'.20 Already a sacrosanct figure, Lenin's early death foreclosed all possibility of disillusionment or dissension. In 1926, the CPGB even attempted a 'Lenin enrolment', in imitation of that already carried out by the Russian party, and commemorations of its 'great leader', sometimes linked with the Spartacist martyrs Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, were always observed with due revolutionary solemnity. At the tenth party congress in 1929, Henry Sara defied those who taunted communists for 'hero worship' and the following day led the conference in standing in Lenin's memory to the playing of the funeral march.21

Lenin was to remain the fount of wisdom and strategy, surviving in a state of ideological embalment, and appearing as a 'god on earth' even to communists claiming to abjure the movement's religiosity.22 Memoirs like Gallacher and Pollitt had chapters entitled 'I meet Lenin' or 'Lenin's death', and even Sylvia Pankhurst stoked up the myth, though with the disconcerting image of a man prone to 'suddenly shutting up one eye, and fixing the other sharply, almost fiercely' upon his interlocutors.23 Among literateurs, the Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid wrote three 'hymns' to Lenin, and his Welsh counterpart T.E. Nicholas one, while the journalist Tom Wintringham sung his praises in his best forgotten poem, 'The immortal Tractor':

*Lenin is living— every word a spark*  
*Driving the great Tractor...*

*We are moulding, forging, shaping the steel of our wills*  
*Into pinions, into pistons, crankshaft-web and crankshaft-throw*  
*We are building Lenin’s Tractor. It will grow.*24

In 1933, it was again Lenin, ‘a man... in the mould of Lincoln and Cromwell’, who enjoyed the somewhat romantic biographical treatment of novelist Ralph Fox. As we have seen, it took Dutt to remind Fox that a communist treatment required not the ‘psychological isolating and subjectivising of Lenin’ but a sense ‘of the movement, of the party, of Marxism as a collective outlook and movement’.25 There was never to be this problem with Stalin. Nevertheless, in the CPGB’s heyday it was he who laid claim to Lenin’s mantle, usurping Trotsky as his vaunted acolyte. From the Little Stalin Library to the Stalinist History of the CPSU (B), there was no escaping Stalin’s presence, and at the height of the terror one could mark the passing weeks under his inscrutable gaze: ‘No revolutionary home is complete without a Stalin calendar’.26 Brian Pearce, a communist who recalls his commitments as religious and even authoritarian in character, had hanging over his bed
a quarter of a century later. Nevertheless, his recollection should not
in Canada in 1928, remained a CPGB member until after Stalin's death
uncomfortable with Stalin worship from the time he first encountered it
relatively late in Britain. Harry McShane, who claimed to have been
exaggerated forms the Stalin cult nevertheless appears to have developed
is not here, but Stalin is always with us’—‘just as it might have been the
Virgin Mary’. On Stalin's death, like Lenin's, tears were shed in
Communists and British society

In Britain, these years marked the apogee of the Stalin cult: years in
which Ewan MacColl's Ballad of Joe Stalin was ‘sung to a kind of coun-
try-and-western banjo accompaniment', and genuflections to his genius
as scientist and historian were offered by the CPGB's leading practition-
ers in these fields. When Pollitt described him as ‘the greatest genius the
international working class has ever produced', the CPGB's 1952
congress responded with 'thunderous' applause, while massed choirs at
the Albert Hall raised their voices in celebration of his birthday. In these
exaggerated forms the Stalin cult nevertheless appears to have developed
relatively late in Britain. Harry McShane, who claimed to have been
uncomfortable with Stalin worship from the time he first encountered it
in Canada in 1928, remained a CPGB member until after Stalin's death
a quarter of a century later. Nevertheless, his recollection should not
entirely be discounted. Even among the choirs saluting Stalin, some
found the experience ‘sickening', and while the subsequent Khrushchev
disclosures generally met with either shock or a form of denial, again
there were communists who described having already been ‘privately
sickened' by his adulation.

In the intervening period, Stalin's British votaries tended to apos-
trophe state, party or people more than Stalin himself. Whereas in
France, Thorez concluded his perorations with him, Barbusse embo-
dered the legend in book form, and his ten-times life-size image over-
shadowed the platform at communist rallies, in Britain the Stalin cult was
generally on a more modest scale. Even Pollitt, in drafting his Seventh
World Congress speech, initially omitted the ‘ritual homage' then due to
Stalin, and though on this point is said to have succumbed to the
Comintern's pressures, such references were again excluded from the text
published in Britain—again in contrast to Thorez. Orthodox Stalinists
like John Strachey sought to explain away the regime's cultic aspects
rather than celebrate them. Pat Sloan, possibly the most assiduous and
uncritical of them, actually likened his powers to Stanley Baldwin's and
attributed the appearance of adulation to a simple difference of linguis-
tic idiom. Such defensiveness was not sanctioned by the Comintern and
was tacitly corrected in an alternative view of Soviet life published
directly afterwards by the ILS alumnus and Comintern worker Hymie
Lee. If Stalin was described as ‘Our Dear Teacher and Father' and ‘our
beloved leader and our genius’, that was therefore what he was.

This was not, however, the language generally adopted in Britain. Parti-
cularly at the wartime peak of his popularity, what Stalin symbol-
ised was not so much genius or paternal authority as the ascendancy of the
worker, and with a familiarity unthinkable in some other communist
parties he was saluted as plain ‘Joe' Stalin, whose quiet effectiveness and
'unsassuming manner' embodied the virtues of the 'common man'.' Joe' in his cap and ‘Denims’... becomes the soldiers' brother and
comrade rather than some far off creature only to be spoken of with
awe', ran a profile in the communist literary monthly Our Time. “Just
like us' is the commonest phrase. Criticism was unheard of. When
Edith Bone called Stalin a bastard and smashed up a portrait of him,
Stanley Forman thought her deranged. More than that, his achieve-
ments were almost universally regarded even by those who found the
adulation exotic. Nevertheless, it is revealing of the impersonality and
fictionality of this conception that no British communist attempted
Stalin's biography beyond a wartime pamphlet 'sketch' by Ivor
M ontagu. Tireless in exploiting avenues for pro-Soviet publicity,
communists nevertheless gave a free run in this lucrative and politically
sensitive matter to the defector J. T. M urphy.

Dimitrov, the third of Pollitt's revolutionary trinity, was closer to what
the communists understood by a revolutionary hero. Little known until
the Reichstag fire trial, his dramatic defence and acquittal, assisted by
an international campaign and counter-trial organised from London,
made him a hero overnight. Nobody living afterwards, Claud Cockburn
recalled, could ‘possibly have any notion of what Dimitrov was to us in
the way of a symbol, a flame in darkness'. Stalin can prove surprisingly
evusive in contemporary sources: in Valentine Cunningham's exhaustive
survey of 1930s writers, the American journalist John Gunther is the
only citation provided for the Stalin cult, and the only creative works we
have come across inspired by Stalin are two monumental heads by the
Hungarian émigré, Peter Peri. Dimitrov, by comparison, haunted the
radical imagination. In 1935, the fellow-travelling novelist Harold
Heslop introduced him into his novel Last Cage Down. ‘Is it possible that
you fellows can doubt in the presence of him?', asks its communist hero
of a group of workmates.
symbol of resistance to fascism.

Always in the vanguard, leading,
Hands held out to uphold
Children and women above this sea
Of hatred and blood....

Great carved woman at the prow
Who knows sorrow: suffers hate: feels love...

In later decades, Paul Robeson, the Rosenbergs, Victor Jara, Nelson Mandela, and the continuing example of the exiled Pasionaria, all stood out as inspirational figures in a way that was true of none of their Russian or East European contemporaries.

But Dimitrov—like Pasionaria—was also an exemplary figure in the sense of the leader as revolutionary tribune, indicting reaction from the rostrum or the prisoner’s dock. Though known to British communists only through the printed word, the image conveyed was of a magnificent command of rhetoric and repartee, reducing his interrogators to impotent fury. Miraculously, it seemed as if the eloquence and invective of the communist public speaker really were instruments of the justice and retribution they so often promised. Stalin, again, was a more remote and inscrutable figure: as Montagu observed, he was no ‘orator-hero’, and unlike Lenin was rarely depicted in oratorical postures. In Britain at least, it was as orator-heroes that Stalin’s followers sought to distinguish themselves.

The most obvious exception also proves the rule. The vaunted theoretician R. Palme Dutt was an auracle of marxist erudition, with an output of party line stretching to Moscow and back again. Every month for fifty years, communists pored over the ‘Notes of the Month’ he wrote for his journal the Labour Monthly, and for some twelve years while he lived in Brussels Dutt also participated in the party’s central committee solely through the medium of closely typed memoranda. It is a measure of his serpentine influence that he did so as one of only four individuals to retain his position throughout. Nevertheless, skills of analysis, exegesis and thesis formulation were not what was understood by communist leadership, and the delineation of roles which Dutt established with Pollitt in the early 1920s represented his own recognition of that fact.

Though another gifted orator, Isabel Brown, used Dutt’s ‘Notes’ for her speeches ‘almost as they stand’, Dutt could never have used his own writings to similar good effect. Even to his critics within the party, his ambitions seemed those of a ‘Cabinet maker’ or ‘God from Olympia’, and
when he helped force Pollitt’s removal as party secretary in 1939, it was
without any illusion that he might come to the fore as his replacement.48
As a Manchester communist recalled of him, ‘he’d have made as much
impact if you’d stuck him in a back room at the Free Trade Hall and let
him talk to himself’.49
The issue was one partly of charisma, but more fundamentally of
class. Not only did the testing ground of oratory neutralise the advan-
tages of the party intellectual, but the communist platform was pre-
eminently the domain of the worker. Still cast in a more traditional
mould were the party’s two MPs of the 1920s, Newbold and Saklatvala,
middle-class politicians formerly of the ILP who were heavily in demand
for local engagements. On the other hand, of the CPGB’s later intakes
of lawyers, academics and other professionals, none figures among the
party’s more popular speakers or candidates, as they might have done in
an earlier age of the platform or in the Labour Party. Instead, it was the
unbowed proletarian who provided a focus of deference or identification,
as figures like Gallacher, Hannington and above all Pollitt dominated the
public perception of the party. ‘First of the fearless, foremost of the free’, an
exuberant admirer saluted Pollitt:

Whose searching eloquence proclaims him fit
To voice the will of highest state, and sit
High amongst the mighty in sovereignty...
Martial you stand, with Promethean front,
Able to daunt powerfulest dictators;
And summer air charms not so still the night
Nor lorn nightingale the woods, as your blunt
Words rapt thousands, listening with applause
Shining in their looks strong as noon-tide light.50

In 1939 the pageant Heirs to the Charter climaxed with the Promethean-
fronted Pollitt himself appearing on stage as the latest incarnation in a
proletarian epic.51
Gallacher too featured in such spectacles, and as a communist MP in
a very different mould from his predecessors he alone rivalled Pollitt’s
public standing. In a characteristic vignette from 1937, a meeting is
described in which the desultory efforts of the ILP’s Jimmy Maxton,
‘reduced—by the march of events and his inability to march with
them—to stammering’, are followed by the anti-fascist playwright Ernst
Toller, struggling to express himself in an unfamiliar tongue. Vainly
attempting to slip unnoticed onto the platform, Gallacher then rises to
wave aside a ‘storm’ of applause, exactly such as peppered Soviet
congress proceedings. ‘You get the impression of vitality, strength and
purpose: especially determined purpose’, wrote the reviewer, probably
Joan Beauchamp.

He is not a tall man but not only does he dominate the meeting...
[the] hall and the platform are too small for him. Were the plat-
form a mile long he would still dominate it.
He is the Worker as Leader.

The picture ends with Toller, the intellectual as votary, rushing forward
to wring Gallacher’s hand ‘in gratitude’.52

Particularly for its middle-class adherents, the mystique of proletarian
authority was a defining motif of 1930s’ communism. The future poet
laureate C. Day Lewis was one such case, drawn to communism as a
movement of ‘order’ and fascinated alike by ‘the submission of a man to
his natural leader’ and the ‘thirst…to be carried away in the movement
of masses’.53 The literary critic Alick West also evoked an image of Pollitt
rising to a ‘storm’ of applause: ‘Never before had I seen such a man, nor
heard such oratory. Drawn towards him, the whole hall, tier upon tier of
people, became a great wave curving over to break, as his impetuous
unconquerable voice soared and struck and rang…’54 Wilf Jobling was a
Chopwell miner, later to die at Jarama, who in 1934 spoke on behalf of
the Hunger Marchers passing through Cambridge, and with his ‘new
rough kind of speech-making’ came across to at least one student as the
sort of man who could ‘lead them’.55 As Day Lewis’s Oxford friend
Gabriel Carritt recalled, ‘I think a lot of the intellectuals, and perhaps
many of the workers too, wanted the party to be the authority, to lay
down how it should be.’56

Encouraging such responses, ‘determined purpose’, not recreation or
amusement, was the hallmark of the party speaker. ‘Serious-minded
audiences do not come to be entertained, but to listen and learn’, Pollitt
insisted, and communist speakers did little to lure their audiences by the
theatrical methods or personal mannerisms beloved of their predeces-
sors.57 Pollitt himself was fond of recalling speakers like Bill Gee, the
‘Socialist Dreadnought’ of his youth, and when Gee fell on hard times
launched a fund to help him out. Nevertheless, the party itself produced
no People’s Sputnik, and Gee found himself outside of the CPGB’s ranks
as early as 1923.58 In this he was not alone. Though a protégé of the
austere John Maclean, John Bird of Fife was known for flamboyant
oratory, foppishness and even exhibitionism, standing out from Scottish
mining audiences in his coloured shirts and bow ties. A former member of the party executive, when he broke with the party in the late 1920s this only seemed to confirm the perils of ‘careerist individualism’.59

Possibly only Tom Mann with his great mimetic skills remained an attraction in the old tradition. Even trademarks like Maxton’s shock of hair or A. J. Cook’s rolled-up shirtsleeves had no real parallel among their communist contemporaries. At party schools, speakers were commended not for rapier-like thrusts or flourishes of rhetoric, but for conveying their message in ‘simple, popular, working-class language’.60 Many became effective communicators, but it is notable that the party’s biggest speaking attractions had all learnt their skills outside of the party, in church, chapel or on the soapbox. Evidently there was even a certain ambivalence towards this least controllable form of communication, Pollitt himself insisting that every word had to be ‘devoted to seriously explaining, point by point… the positive policy of the Communist Party’.61 At various times, there were circulated in duplicated or printed form ‘Points for Propagandists’, weekly ‘Speaker’s Notes’ or even complete draft speeches. Even internally, branch discussions in the mid-1920s were meant to be guided by a weekly political letter, entrusted to a ‘leading and experienced member’ who should ‘deliver it as if it was his own prepared speech, amplifying it to suit the occasion’.62 The use of stenographers at higher party meetings showed the same preoccupation with bringing the spoken word under control, ‘down in black and white, there to be ever readable’.63

Proclaiming geographical as well as social origins with every syllable, it is not surprising that even national speakers retained something of the local appeal of their predecessors. Perhaps only the Indian Saklatvala combined ‘perfect English’ with the authentic experience of an oppressed grouping, and although not always suited to parliament—Ellen Wilkinson described opponents goading him to ‘speak up’ as his voice rose to a yell—his platform skills attracted invitations to speak from beyond communist circles even in the Class Against Class period.64 Other outstanding speakers made their greatest impression on their home turf. Scottish accents in principle had an immense proletarian credibility. Brian Blain recalled that in the 1950s they were ‘worth ten points on the conviction scale before they said anything’ while at Oxford Raphael Samuel’s North London Jewish origins were overlain with a Henry Higgins-defying Scots brogue.65 Nevertheless, when the Paisley-bom Johnny Campbell contested three parliamentary elections in South Wales, he was remembered as ‘broad Scotch’ and ‘very difficult to understand’.66 In Manchester, Joe O’Reilly actually thought Gallacher ‘incomprehensible’, though when he spoke in the Vale of Leven, he concluded his speech ‘to clapping and stomping of feet that lasted for a minute’.67 Even the one-time ‘boy preacher’ Arthur Horner was described by the exacting Mancunian Joe O’Reilly as ‘cursed by a South Wales accent’. In the coalfield itself it was another matter. ‘Oh I thought that Horner was—well you know—a good preacher would always appeal to me… being brought up in a Welsh atmosphere, in a Welsh environment, and going to Chapel…’.68

Owing more to the soap-box, the theatre and the popular debating society, Harry Pollitt had an appeal in his native Lancashire that was undimmed by his spendings most of his life in London. There was more to this than accent, and southerners noted the immediate rapport that Pollitt struck up with northern audiences, bantering with them even at the expense of wave-like experiences and his own injunctions to serious-mindedness.69 Even in the south, his northern persona was part of his appeal,70 but among those most strongly affected by his rhetoric fellow Lancastrians figured disproportionately. Naturally Joe O’Reilly thought him the ‘most wonderful’ orator he had ever heard, and the Mancachere engineer Eddie Frow recalled that he had a ‘fantastic following’ in the city.71 ‘Ah Harry Pollitt, he has the voice of a bell’, another Mancunian recalled her father saying. ‘His eloquence was such, that his Lancashire accent sounded the most beautiful dialect in the world.’72 Mick Jenkins, later a prominent communist official, recalled attending one of Pollitt’s Lenin memorial meetings at Manchester Free Trade Hall in 1924. On the platform were the three Scots, Gallacher, Bell and M acManus, but it was Pollitt who caught his imagination as he lent his voice to the awe-inspiring legends of Bolshevism. ‘Wha a story! Wha a speaker! H eart were bleedin’ in that audience, that unforgetable night’, Jenkins recalled. By the end of the evening, it was not Lenin but Pollitt, now somehow fused with Lenin, whom Jenkins unabashedly regarded as his ‘hero’.73

If national speakers and ‘monster’ meetings provided the high points in the communist calendar, local orator-heroes were needed to maintain a continuous communist presence in their own communities and organisations. For many, the acclaim of a partisan audience was less familiar than scepticism, indifference or outright hostility. Others, however, established themselves as effective local tribunes, whose status in a few communist strongholds was formalised by their election as local councillors. Epitomising the type, and immortalising it in the larger-than-life forms of his novels Cwmardy and We Live, was the former South Wales miner, Lewis Jones. A Rhondda checkweigher victimised in 1929, Jones was one of those whom not M oscow gold but inter-war unemployment...
released for full-time party work, and in 1936 he was elected one of Britain's earliest communist county councillors. No supporter of leadership cults, he is said to have defied pressure to join in ovations to Stalin at the Comintern's Seventh World Congress. Even so, in the Bunyanesque characterisations of his novels, conflicting claims to working-class allegiance were largely personified in terms of the clash between alternative leadership figures. Moreover, their hero's battle to exercise that leadership for the party is persistently identified with his command of the spoken word: taunting the boss's son at the coalface; voicing men's grievances at the labour exchange; indicting class justice from the dock; and, providing one of the novels' climacterics, putting the miners' case during the stay-down strikes of 1936:

The dense crowd of men and women began to sway spasmodically, and suddenly, without a word or warning sign, Len felt himself lifted in the air and carried to the tram, where he was gently placed down feet first.

'Speech. Speech', came the insistent demand.74

Though a former Labour College student, immersed in the literary culture of the miners' libraries, Jones was described by his lover and collaborator Mavis Llewellyn as most at home on the platform—'a born propagandist, an orator', capable of 'sway[ing] great crowds' with intensity of class feeling.75

Addressing meetings almost daily, Jones's activity reached a new pitch of fervour on his being refused the party's permission to go to Spain—the setting of the culminating drama of We Live. Sadly, we now know that towards the end of 1938 Jones had been dismissed as the party's Rhondda area organiser on grounds of political confusion and the continuing stagnation of party membership in the area. There is also a suggestion that Jones's personal behaviour had likewise come under scrutiny.76 One may only guess at his desperation to prove himself, but he died weeks afterwards of a heart seizure. As party legend had it, after addressing thirty meetings in a day the week that Barcelona fell to Franco. A true tribune-figured role, his funeral procession was reportedly the biggest that the Rhondda had witnessed in decades.

Figures like Lewis Jones performed at local level the sort of 'tribune' functions which Georges Lavau identified the French communist party as a whole fulfilling at a national institutional level.77 Particularly for groups like the inter-war unemployed, for whom no proper mechanisms of representation were established, the role of the NUWM activist in the articulation and representation of grievances was considerable. In his book Democratic Rhondda, Chris Williams cites a health ministry official grudgingly describing Jones's efforts to ensure the taking up of benefits entitlements. 'He has for example a motor van with a loud speaker by means of which he broadcasts to all in doubt as to their rights and invites all with a grievance to report their cases to local communist agents...[who] pass on the particulars to Mr Jones who then gives advice', he wrote. 'He also holds crowded meetings every Sunday night', he went on, adding that 'a very large number of people...now applying for our relief' would have refrained from asking for help were it not for Jones's propaganda.78 Williams in his conclusion describes Jones and his fellow communists very much in terms of tribe functions, 'aligned...in a unity across the parties of the left...standing together against unsympathetic non-resident Welsh cultural elites, against the colliery companies, and against a predominantly Conservative national state'.79 Such activities were not confined to the little Moscows, and from rent strikes in Birmingham and East London, to blocking the redevelopment of Covent Garden, leading post-war squatters or forcing access to the tubes as air-raid shelters, it was in the performance of such roles that communists made their most distinctive contributions to their manifold local histories.

The contribution of these individuals to the CPGB's effectiveness can hardly be understated. In France, Annie Kriegel has argued that no party's support was so little reliant on the qualities of its local representatives as the PCF's.80 In Britain, at least, the reverse was true: as Williams argues, it was to their 'human relevance' and not their party credentials that figures like Jones owed their reputations, and a recurrent complaint of party leaders concerned the failure to translate their individual standing into organisational results for the party itself. Even in the vibrant oppositional culture of South Wales, stress has been laid on the crucial role in many communities of 'one or two dynamic individuals'.81 It is notable that communist councillors were often elected in geographically self-contained communities where there was established a strong personal basis of support, such as the Yorkshire pit village of M oorends or the Suffolk enclave of Leiston. In the former mining ward of Bulwell East/ St Albans, Nottingham, the tireless local campaigner John Peck was returned as a communist councillor at the twenty-third attempt in 1987. The entirely personal character of his achievement was demonstrated when he held onto the seat for the Greens after the CPGB's dissolution.82

This does not mean that leadership had the alchemistic properties that the CPGB sometimes attributed to it. In the years of Class Against Class,
the dismal results that came of sending ‘brigades’ of would-be leaders into political trouble spots only underlined how inextricably leadership represented accumulations of experience and legitimacy within particular social or industrial milieux. Even in crude electoral terms, Pollitt noted in 1931 how the party’s most successful candidates were those with strong local records of struggle, not those ‘dumped in places without local connections’. Only perhaps in the ‘new’ political spaces of the period could effective leadership figures sometimes be imported from outside, as happened with Abe Lazarus, an inspirational figure in the Firestone and Pressed Steel strikes of the early 1930s.

While acknowledging its limitations, it is nevertheless this quality of ‘leadership’, in the sense of personal example, capability and articulacy, that best explains the more localised variables of communist implantation in Britain. We have already noted the multiplier effect in the establishment of a communist presence in particular localities. In personal recollections of recruitment to the party, it is striking how often this is identified not so much with ideology or even the force of events, but with the example of existing communists, individually or collectively. Even amid their disillusionment in communism as a creed, this was a notable feature of ‘Cold War’ memoirs like those of Margaret McCarthy and Douglas Hyde. ‘[I]t was the actual, practical activities of the young Communists... rather than the abstract theories of revolution and proletarian dictatorship which claimed me for Communism’, M CCarthy recalled; they seemed ‘more purposeful, more confident, more self-sacrificing’. Though he left the CPGB for the Trotskyist Socialist Labour League, Behan too described the communists as the ‘salt of the earth’. Stuart Purkis, a leader of the first Trotskyist breakaway a quarter of a century earlier, recorded that, with a ‘few and trifling exceptions’, he had ‘nothing but goodwill and comradeship’ in the party and matter-of-factly as a ‘professional revolutionist’. Ernie Benson used the same phrase regarding his appointment as a local organiser in Leeds. Even the party secretary Inkpin, a colourless administrative figure who in 1929 had spent half of his forty-five years as a political functionary, described himself not as the class official but that of the ‘professional revolutionary’. Even the party between the wars was not cast in the mould of the traditional working-class official but that of the ‘professional revolutionary’. Even the party secretary Inkpin, a colourless administrative figure who in 1929 had spent half of his forty-five years as a political functionary, described himself matter-of-factly as a ‘professional revolutionist’.

Professional revolutionaries

The test of leadership was the field of ‘struggle’. A critique of bureaucracy was central to early communist discourse, differentiating communism from reformism by the concept of the ‘financial bureaucracy’ allegedly dominating both the Labour and TUC conferences. Within the party itself, accusations of remoteness from the day-to-day struggles of the workers were routinely exchanged, and spells ‘in the factory’ recommended as a corrective exercise. Not even the functionaries of the international were exempt, and there was no more stinging epithet than that of ‘office boy’ or ‘party clerk’.

On the other hand, no other British political party consistently maintained such high proportions of officials to members, underwritten in the first place by Comintern subsidies and subsequently by the heavy financial commitments of members and sympathisers. Following wild variations in funding in the party’s formative years, by 1926 there were said to be twenty-three full-time party workers, excluding press and ancillary organisations, two King Street technical workers and a dozen students at the party’s central training school. Five years later, despite a 70 per cent fall in party membership, the corresponding figure was nineteen, rising to forty-one with ancillary bodies and sixty-five with technical and production workers. Despite a shift from Comintern funding, by the mid-1940s the party had a central and district apparatus bearing comparison with the Labour Party’s. Moreover, its central committee was dominated by functionaries and on at least three occasions—1926, 1929 and 1945—specific measures of exclusion or co-option were introduced to counterbalance this tendency. During the mass unemployment between the wars, even displaced officials were often pensioned off with a job in a front organisation or one of the Soviet ‘institutions’.

There was more to this than the proverbial pot calling the kettle black. In lifestyle, demeanour and self-perception, the communist full-timer between the wars was not cast in the mould of the traditional working-class official but that of the ‘professional revolutionary’. Even the party secretary Inkpin, a colourless administrative figure who in 1929 had spent half of his forty-five years as a political functionary, described himself matter-of-factly as a ‘professional revolutionist’. Ernie Benson used the same phrase regarding his appointment as a local organiser in Leeds, suggesting how even mundane tasks were invested with some of the glamour and portentousness of Bolshevism.

In 1934 an edition of Dimitrov’s prison letters concluded with a precept inspired by the imprisoned German communist leader Thaelmann, that ‘one must be capable of subordinating one’s whole personal life to the interests of the proletariat’. For the ‘professional revolutionary’ between the wars, this meant a readiness to uproot oneself, neglect one’s home, risk imprisonment and eschew all personal sentiment where the interests of the party demanded it. Mobile, abrasive and careless of self-interest, they comport themselves as officers, not office-boys, of the class war.

‘Such officers, such leaders, naturally have to undergo considerable training to fit them for their position’, the Workers’ Weekly noted in 1924,
and the emphasis not on education but ‘training’ was one of the salient features of the inter-war communist movement. Where figures like Pollitt and Hannington had honed their political skills through experience and informal mentorship—what Pollitt rather pointedly described as ‘an apprenticeship to politics’—the CPGB showed a fixation on formal training owing less to native precedent than the example, instruction and material resources of Bolshevism. Initially, all members were expected to undergo a basic training, and the category of probationary member helped give credence to the notion of the party itself as a revolutionary officers’ corps. With Bolshevisation, however, the emphasis shifted to the sort of elite party school prefigured by the pre-war SPD but hitherto lacking any real equivalent in Britain.

Regarded by Michels as a key element in the formation of a party oligarchy, the process of moulding and differentiation was accentuated in this case by the provision of such training, not in Britain itself but in Moscow, at the Lenin School. Its ideal cadre, as constructed from student reports and the school’s entry criteria, was young, working-class, usually but not exclusively male, purposive, disciplined, and yet able to exercise leadership and even initiative. Buttressed by the conspiratorial nature of the exercise, attendance at the school provided both a mark of distinction and a mechanism for identifying future leaders. Already by 1931, half of the CPGB’s organisers were said to have attended the school, and with the authority they derived from their ‘Moscow training’ they helped define the wider generational experience.

Like the ‘leather jackets’ of Bolshevik mythology, for some of them at least the mark of leadership was not the comfort of a party office but the cult of speed and action symbolised by the internal combustion engine. ‘The automobile is a far more genuine sign of present-day sovereignty than the orb and sceptre’, Trotsky wrote in his History of the Russian Revolution, and early British delegates to Russia noted the abandon with which they were driven round Moscow, as if taking literally Stalin’s adage that there were no obstacles a Bolshevik could not overcome. Even in Britain, at the time of the CPGB’s launching it was reported that ‘Moscow gold’ was being used to supply MacManus and other leading members with cars…and none had money to spare for bus fares. In the Fife ‘little Moscow’ of Lumphinnans, the young Abe Moffat recalled many years afterwards how impressed he was by visiting communists arriving by car. The use of a vehicle was therefore a matter of kudos as well as efficiency, and the communist virtue of modesty did not always temper the satisfaction to be derived from giving orders. Except that he did not attend the Lenin School, Rust was in many ways the prototypical Third Period professional revolutionary. During the 1929 election campaign, then aged twenty-six, he ‘took it upon himself’ as YCL secretary to secure a car to mobilise a counter-action against an Empire Day rally of Lord Beaverbrook’s in Hyde Park. Evidently even those inured to Moscow’s orders did not take to receiving them from youths turning up in cars, for he mustered only eight protestors, against Beaverbrook’s 150,000—a fact which understandably ‘quite demoralised the majority of the eight’. The precocious assumption of authority was not unique to Rust. Referring to a march at Tower H ill, where there was the possible additional factor of Irish-Jewish ethnic tensions, Pollitt described how the assembled dockers were made to feel ridiculous by ‘YCL comrades…endeavouring to control them and order them about as though they were generals’.

Unsupported by any real sanctions, the giving out of orders was a matter of toughness as well as discipline. Biggest and toughest of the lot was Peter Kerrigan, a sometime boxer and footballer of formidable build. Hardened by the Clydeside workshops, two years of military service and involvement in the unemployed struggles of the 1920s, Kerrigan attended the Lenin School and spent most of the 1930s as the CPGB’s Scottish organiser, leading successive hunger marches and going to Spain as a political commissar. In Spain, when he shot and wounded the departing battalion commander Wilf M acartney, many refused to believe that this was an accident, although there is little to suggest that the incident was premeditated.
Bob Cooney was of a similar mould, a former commissar in Spain who had come back from the Lenin School feeling like a 'giant'. Nevertheless, as party organiser in Aberdeen, even Cooney described himself as 'terrified' of Kerrigan's visits when he would look for somewhere to hide. 'Peter was this kind of man, no matter what you'd done, no matter what you achieved, there was always something he could find out that you hadn't done or you hadn't done well enough.'

With a chest like the Dnieprostroi dam and a pronounced Glaswegian accent, Kerrigan communicated in a 'roar' which detracted nothing from the effect. On entering the Glasgow party office, a visiting Londoner assumed he was intruding upon a terrible row, but it was 'just Peter Kerrigan speaking in his normal voice... He was a terrifying sight.' In Bob Darke's Cold War exposé The Communist Technique in Britain, Kerrigan is described reducing erring comrades to tears and chafing at the lack of labour camps to send them to. Though Darke's account is often risible, there is no reason to doubt the testimony of one of Kerrigan's successors in Glasgow that this was the approach prevailing between the wars, when 'it was always perceived as an aspect of communist leadership that you could come down like a ton of bricks on people'.

Toughness meant subordinating oneself as well as others to the party. Between the wars it required a constant readiness to take up new responsibilities, shunted from district to district or in and out of the party centre. 'For the fourth time since the Party was formed I am faced with the break-up of my home', complained the sometime Glasgow party organiser, 'For the fourth time since the Party was formed I am faced with the break-up of my home', complained the sometime Glasgow party centre. 'For the fourth time since the Party was formed I am faced with the break-up of my home', complained the sometime Glasgow party centre. 'For the fourth time since the Party was formed I am faced with the break-up of my home', complained the sometime Glasgow party centre.

The majority of these figures also attended the Lenin School or carried out other responsibilities in Moscow. Whatever the allure of the workers' state, these responsibilities too could represent a subordination of personal interests to political needs, and cadres are not infrequently described as reluctant to go to Moscow or eager to return. That this was particularly an issue for those with personal ties only reinforced the identification of the professional revolutionary with the young and unattached. J.T. Murphy, who was in Moscow from 1926 to 1928, later provided a vivid picture of the Comintern's Hotel Lux, with its fun, fights, storms and celebrations, carrying on into the night.

The ultimate test of toughness was to have served time inside, and some party members had the view that 'the only 100 per cent communists were those who had served one or more terms in prison'. By exposing the realities of the class war while demonstrating the communists' dedication in prosecuting it, such experiences caused not demoralisation but increased self-regard and the esteem of one's peers. Lazar Zaidman, who at the age of eighteen was given a three-year sentence in Romania, described in his party biography how his morale was high and he saw himself as 'a hero of the working class'. Alec Geddes, observing that it was 'good that now and then... our devotion to the cause is tested', wrote from Cardiff gaol in 1926 that 'whilst lying here under the lock and key of capitalism I am buoyed up by knowing that our Congress will assist in hastening the day when those who built the prisons will inhabit them'.

The experience was also potentially educative, so that Geddes and Rust studied German, Zaidman French, Gollan Keynes, Pollitt the Webbs' History of Trade Unionism, and Horner Clausewitz's On War, with reportedly profound consequences for his industrial philosophy. Though not quite Gramsci's Prison Notebooks, this at least was a respite from round-the-clock activism.

Beyond the party, the willingness to undergo imprisonment marked out the communists, like the suffragettes before them, engendering feelings of solidarity, curiosity and sometimes awe. As early as 1921, police raids on King Street and the arrest of the party secretary Inkpin...
were exploited by the formation of a Free Speech Defence Committee, and nearly 20,000 copies of a pamphlet What Is the Communist Party? sold.\(^{116}\) A gain in 1925, the arrest of twelve of the party’s most prominent leaders provided a major plank in its first mass recruiting campaign, on the basis that ‘more support... will be gathered on this issue than anything which has yet transpired’.\(^{117}\) Harnessing such sympathies was the International Class War Prisoners’ Aid (ICWPA) or Icky-woppa, which in 1926 secured George Lansbury’s emphatic endorsement from a Moscow platform.\(^{118}\) A similarly energetic campaign was later waged on behalf of the thirty-one Meerut prisoners arrested in 1929, mainly comprising Indian militants but also including the CPGB members Ben Bradley, Philip Spratt and Lester Hutchinson. For some three years, the communists used the Meerut campaign to expose the realities of colonial rule and, according to Stephen Howe, the campaign generated more left-wing pamphlet literature than any other colonial issue between the wars.\(^{119}\)

To some extent their intention was to bring about the arrest of several prominent comrades, especially of candidates, Rust explained of his anti-Beaverbrook escapade, and several cases are recorded of communists inviting imprisonment by refusing to pay fines—in Tom Mann’s case, at the age of seventy-six! There was also a relish for confrontation for its own sake. ‘There is no use talking about “class against class” if you are going to walk away when the policeman comes up’, said the pugnacious Willie Gallacher, while Bob Lovell of the Icky-woppa was contemptuous of functionaries who were never there to get ‘bashed or knocked out’, or else to ‘smash’ the odd banner pole on the heads of police.\(^{120}\) In Wal Hannington’s memoir Unemployed Struggles (1936), illustrations show him grappling with policemen, emerging from prison, or on a Downing Street deputation with his head bandaged, all among images of street battles which Hannington described with scant concession to current popular frontism. Conviction politicians in more limited, and Bramley himself remained London organiser for over a decade until retiring on health grounds. His successor, John Mahon, spent nearly thirty years in the same position, eventually commuting into London from Leatherhead.

There are limits to any generalisation. As district secretary in his native Hampshire, Dave Priscott commented in his party autobiography on his great attachment to the area and requested that he not be asked to leave it permanently. ‘Still, when you boil it down, I’ll go anywhere the Party wants me’, he added, and from 1956 spent the remainder of his long party career in the Rhondda and then in Yorkshire.\(^{122}\) Even Priscott spent several years in each position, however, and district officials of the 1950s and 1960s might spend upwards of fifteen years in a particular office. Before moving (to Sydenham) as national industrial organiser, Bert Ramelson did so as the party’s Yorkshire district secretary. In Kent and
Teesside, Lenin School students Gil Bradbury and George Short did stints of over twenty years, while after twenty-seven years in Surrey Sid French gave retrospective credence to the argument for shifting organis- ers about by taking much of the district with him on founding the Stalinist New Communist Party in 1977. Even when officials were moved, it was to make the most of the shrinking pool of veterans rather than bring on younger talents. Only with the retirement of this pre-war generation during the 1960s did recruits from the post-June 1941 period at last begin to comprise a majority of new district appointments.

With the classic bureaucratic attributes of longevity and routine came other adjustments to more conventional conceptions of politics. Although the CPGB retained a system of party education unparalleled by any other British political party, it was henceforth less intensive, selective and instrumental than between the wars, aimed at raising the general political understanding of the party rather than advancing a narrow leading stratum. By the same token, the CPGB either was not offered or did not avail itself of the opportunities to attend the Moscow party schools taken up by other European communist parties. Not only were officials unlikely to be shunted around the districts, but routines were rarely disrupted by imprisonment or assignments abroad. With the exception of the militants prosecuted under Heath’s 1971 Industrial Relations Act, the few imprisonments of British communists after the war nearly all took place abroad, including in so-called socialist countries. A significant subgroup of British communists did settle for varying periods in these countries, and by the 1960s there were estimated to be twenty-five of them, either sent by the party or making their own bilateral arrangements. However, communists were now much more likely to go there on one of the ‘party holidays’ offered functionaries as a somewhat compromising form of international solidarity.

Trips to Bulgaria aside, party employment did not lose its connotations of commitment and self-denial. Even between the wars, cases are recorded of industrial workers turning down party employment because of the inadequate wages, or returning to industry to have enough to ‘get married’ on. With post-war full employment and rising living standards, the sense of relative financial sacrifice became more generalised and pronounced, and short-term movements in and out of party employment are often attributable to this fact. Already in 1950, the party’s London cadres organiser remarked on ‘the diversionary multitude of activities and possibilities for personal advancement, which is sapping away many of our promising comrades’. That this diversion was typically that of industrial or trade-union work underlines the party’s diminished credibility as itself a vehicle of struggle and transformation, as well as its inability to match the wages now available in industry. When industrial workers returned to industry after personally and financially taxing spells as party full-timers, such decisions were justified as re-establishing personal contact with the shopfloor, although the factor of material hardship was also freely admitted. The Coventry sheet-metal worker George Guy, who insisted ‘that on the party wage I would find it hard to adjust my standard of living’, must have been one of many such figures who never even tried working for the party.

What subsidies there were now came not from Moscow but from ‘party wives’. Arthur Utting, a building worker who for a time was the party’s South East Midlands district secretary, discovered on taking up the position that his fellow functionaries frequently depended on the wages of partners in paid employment. ‘I was the wage-earner really, because the party wage was very small and not always forthcoming’, recalled one such spouse. Of several other such cases, Solly Kaye gave up full-time party work when his wife left her job on health grounds and immediately tripled his earnings by returning to his trade as a furrier. In due course, he tripled them again as a copywriter employed on the strength of the communist leaflets he had drafted in Stepney.

Kaye was not the only one with transferable skills. Whether one thinks of Utting and Guy, who became respectively the president and general secretary of their unions, or of the distinguished careers in the media or professions of many communist intellectuals, it is difficult to think of the cases where refusing or relinquishing party employment proved detrimental to an individual’s personal interests. Harvey Klehr claims that in the CPUSA, ‘while there is no direct evidence…that the best leaders left the party, it is instructive that so many of the ex-communists succeeded in their post-party careers’. Such a circular line of reasoning lacks logic as well as substantiation, and it is wonderfully perverse to infer the likely failure of one population of communists from the success of another which in other respects is indistinguishable from it. On graduating from Oxford in 1952, Monty Johnstone recalls succumbing to pressure to edit the YCL weekly Challenge, more or less simultaneously, his near-contemporary R.W. Davies resisted similar entreaties to take on the CPGB weekly World News and Views, which older heads advised him was a ‘complete blind ally’. The same year, Eric Hobsbawm diplomatically noted in his party autobiography that he had ‘considered full-time work, but don’t think I’m good enough at organising to take the idea seriously’.

Perhaps Hobsbawm thought already of the example of James Klugmann, ‘guru’ to the Cambridge communists of the 1930s and
thought by Victor Kiernan potentially ‘the equal of any Marxist scholar Britain has produced’, and yet the author only of the wretched from Trotsky to Tito. Both Hobsbawm and Davies went on to enjoy outstanding academic careers, while Johnstone, though making many distinguished intellectual interventions, functioned primarily within a party and broader left context, within which he became identified with the pressure inside the CPGB to confront the legacy and continuing realities of Stalinism. All that one can safely say is that their respective talents had no bearing on their initial choice of career, and that had Davies or Hobsbawm chosen the party they would no doubt have borne out K Lehr’s hypothesis by failing conventional criteria of success. The problem for the communist party was that Johnstone’s was increasingly the sort of commitment that few communists were prepared to make.

The CPGB apparatus was by this time an unusual bureaucracy: one in which emoluments and sometimes status accrued to those who escaped the party’s employment, rather than those who joined it. In 1954, Priscott could still describe as his next ‘proudest moment’ to joining the party that of being asked to work for it. However, beyond its immediate incumbents, party employment was ever less likely to be held in the same esteem. According to the sometime NUS president Digby Jacks—who himself became not a party but a trade-union functionary—‘it was always the trade union leaders who had the highest status among us when we were students’. Far from running down workers in his haste to revolutionise them, Utting’s successor in Bedfordshire may be pictured in the heartland of Goldthorpe’s affluent worker, fulfilling his engagements by bus until retiring in 1979. ‘Obviously his commitment was far greater than that of any of the rest of us’, recalled one industrial contact, but not necessarily in such a way as translated into political authority. Even more demoralising was the pressure to make the trial contact, but not necessarily in such a way as translated into political authority. As befitted their claims to exercise moral and political leadership, communists were expected always to conduct themselves in ways reflecting positively upon the party. In part these attributes were to be demonstrated collectively. For May Day 1928, communists in London were urged to ‘step out in good style not straggling along as is usually the case’:

Similarly with the singing. The Party should lead with the singing of real revolutionary and labour songs… bawling out ‘Who the hell’ etc etc should be discouraged.

‘Follow the instructions of your leaders’, ran a similar instruction from St Pancras in 1926. ‘Remember you are organised workers, not a mob.’

This concern with maintaining appearances was manifested in all aspects of party life, from the state of party premises—to be ‘kept in such a condition that they are themselves a fine piece of propaganda’—to the dress and appearance of its members. Again in St Pancras, a middle-class member was forbidden to take part in poster-parades until he shaved off his beard (‘which he did’), while Barbara Dobb, wife of the economist Maurice Dobb, was debarred for wearing ‘a plaid cloak and sandals’. Sometimes this seeming respectability was identified with the political compromises of the popular front, and the attempt to court ‘[not] the most indigent, most oppressed strata of the workers, but…the bowler-hatted, Sunday-best allies of Liberals and petty-bourgeois Labourites’. In fact, these earlier examples suggest that Labourite values had from the start been respected if not adopted by many British Labourites.154
communists. Only during the Class Against Class period was there any sustained collective effort to embrace the interests and activities of the indigent or unconventional, and Dutt even then reaffirmed the party’s ambition of attracting ‘the best, steadiest workers’ rather than ‘debris of existing society’. In the words of Hymie Fagan, himself a former ‘Labourite’ who joined in 1925 over the issue of the communist prisoners, ‘we did not want our members to appear queer... in the eyes of the Labourite’ who joined in 1925 over the issue of the communist prisoners.

MacManus’s behaviour, and was foremost in opposing the return to communism.158 More the sort of figure that the party came to cut in public in the deteriorating effect of metropolitan life upon the party chairman in the case of the dashing young Etonian Arthur Reade, or indirectly, as working class’.156

The same injunction extended to members’ personal lives. In Italy the obligation to ‘have an earnest and exemplary private life’ was even recorded on party membership cards, and the CPGB in a more secular way was also committed to sobriety, self-respect and the maintenance of decent communist homes.157 Even at the outset, communist bohemianism tended to be identified with a sort of jeuness dorée, either directly, as in the case of the dashing young Etonian Arthur Reade, or indirectly, as in the deteriorating effect of metropolitan life upon the party chairman MacManus.158 More the sort of figure that the party came to cut in public was that of the Clydeside rebel Willie Gallacher: ‘genial man, exemplary citizen, and loving husband’, as Hugh MacDiarmid called him in one of his poems:

Lovely in his integrity, exemplifying
All that is best in public service— distinct,
Clear-headed and clean-hearted...159

Almost as much as by his pugnacity and incorruptibility, Gallacher stood for communism in the shape of his settled, loyal relationship with his wife Jean, and the dignified way in which in the Second World War they bore the deaths in action of their adopted sons.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to identify such conventional moralities with the arrival of a ‘totalitarian model’ on the British left.160 If anything, it suggests conformity to prevailing labour movement values, not so much leading exemplary lives as ‘normal’ ones, conspicuous only by political example. Whether with regard to drink or sexual relationships, this again meant variation over time and in relation to different party cultures, together with discrepancies between the public and private faces of communism. In Scotland, where Gallacher and many other party leaders originated, a strong socialist temperance tradition was carried forward into the CPGB by figures like Bob Stewart, who represented the Socialist Prohibition Fellowship at its foundation congress. Nevertheless such beliefs were neither officially nor informally promulgated by the CPGB, and the tendency was rather for teetallers to embrace the culture of social drinking than the reverse.161 Even John Mabon, a teetaller and vegetarian of somewhat gaunt appearance, took to appearing in pubs with his own sandwiches and ordering glasses of lemonade when instructed to mix more closely with the workers. Though he also sported a rather conspicuous cloth cap, the point was not looking ‘queer’.162

Similarly, with regard to marital irregularities, the party’s attitude was pragmatic rather than censorious, though no less intrusive for that. During the 1920s three experienced functionaries, Ted Lismer, Sid Elias and George Hardy, were respectively suspended from party membership, deprived of their party responsibilities and relocated to Moscow as a result of extra-marital relationships. Hardy, an organiser with the North American Wobblies, with itinerant mores and working patterns now attributed his victimisation to ‘the narrowest petty bourgeois conception of relationships’.163 Lismer, a Sheffield engineering worker, described the leadership as ‘a bunch of hypocritical bureaucrats’.164 In both cases, Gallacher was a leading antagonist, adopting an attitude which was more exemplary than genial. Gallacher also strongly disapproved of MacManus’s behaviour, and was foremost in opposing the return to Britain of the Moscow-domiciled communist H.W. Emery, who was alleged to have abandoned his wife and children on embracing communism.165 Nevertheless, just as Gallacher’s attitude to drink was regarded as a personal foible, so his colleagues were primarily concerned with the prospect of public scandal rather than the purity of its members’ private lives. Nor were such apprehensions without foundation. After discovering that the party’s confidential stenographer was pregnant with her husband’s child, Hardy’s wife threatened disturbances at the party offices and exposure in the bourgeois press. When Bob Lovell’s marriage broke up a few years later, he received exactly this sort of coverage. Within the party itself Elias’s replacement as Tyneside organiser in 1928 found the district preoccupied with the question “if it was right for a Communist to divorce her husband J.B.S. Haldane on grounds of ‘political expediency’.166

Such concerns were not confined to the 1920s, and the party’s right to set the parameters for its members’ personal relationships was surprisingly widely accepted. Despite the many unpublicised separations or cohabitations within the party, Charlotte Haldane heeded requests not to divorce her husband J.B.S. Haldane on grounds of ‘political expediency’.167 Following the break-up of their respective marriages in the 1950s, Ruth and Edmund Frow agreed at first not to live with each other, so as not to jeopardise the latter’s influence within the Manchester AEU.168 In the more intrusive atmosphere of the Cold War, irrespective
of considerations of publicity, an organiser could be hauled over the coals for an affair leading to the break-up of his party marriage and the consequent undermining of ‘mutual confidence and collective work’ by ‘subjective tendencies in the Area leadership’. That the organiser concerned accepted ‘without qualification’ both the censure itself and the demand for self-criticism throws a light on the quasi-sacerdotal authority which the party exercised over some of its members. At the same time, this was a closely knitted political world in which ‘party affairs’ were an issue of considerable sensitivity potentially involving one’s ‘comrades’ and the party itself in a sort of complicity. Two interviewees recalled the personal distress that affairs or allegations of affairs gave rise to, precisely for this reason, and one left the party with deep feelings of betrayal over the break-up of his party marriage. Here the issues were very much those of a closed society, reinforced by the ideal of the family party.

Nevertheless, the idea of totalitarian influences needs handling with precision as to both scope and chronology. Far from being an imposition from abroad, respectability in the 1920s, as represented by the ostracisation of Hardy, was justified to the Comintern by reference to ‘the general outlook and psychology of the workers (and even the Party members)... that it may be difficult for comrades in other countries to understand’. That the Comintern for its part found in Hardy’s favour, and with his partner Paddy Ayriss he was entrusted with important responsibilities with the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat in China. Moreover, even after the war that the socialist family at the heart of Soviet social policy began to temper the lifestyle heterodoxy of the Bloomsbury left. By 1953, the Communist Review could feature an onslaught from the people’s democracies identifying ‘sexual looseness’ as the work of ‘Trotskyite-Titoite agents’, sowing confusion among the young by the promotion of ‘debauchery and licentiousness’. ‘The Communist Marxist-Leninist standpoint is that of monogamy’, it thundered. Though not too many communists in Britain mistook sexual licence for Titoism, the strain of native revolutionary priggishness did now have the highest sanction.

Charles Ashleigh experienced the new Soviet morality more directly. Born in 1888, he had joined the socialist movement as early as 1905, working with the Pankhurst sisters’ ill-fated brother Harry on a socialist dictionary and gaining notoriety as one of the ‘Cardiff land grabbers’, a group of out-of-work labourers who squatted on former common land. In 1909 he found work in Argentina as a railway clerk, and three years later made his way to the USA where, like Hardy, he became a Wobbly and travelled the country as an ‘organiser-at-large’. Moving in left-wing literary circles, he contributed to The Masses and International Socialist Review and rubbed shoulders with figures like Jack London and John Reed. Following his imprisonment and deportation after the great Wobbly trial of 1918, he arrived in Britain via Russia in September 1923 and found a niche within the party as a journalist and translator.

Whether despite or because of the fact that his current party work was regarded as ‘entirely unsatisfactory’, in 1931 it was agreed that Ashleigh should return to the USSR to work for the Moscow Daily News. Already living openly as a homosexual, Ashleigh now became identified with the attempt to recreate in Moscow’s international colony ‘the London and New York radical Bohemian atmosphere of hard drinking and easy loving’ depicted in somewhat homophobic language in Freda Utley’s memoirs. In 1934, with Stalin’s stranglehold on Soviet life tightening, he was denounced by a housemate as a ‘centre of demoralising vice’ around whom a group of British and German communists were ‘openly practising homosexuality’. Reported to the Moscow Control Commission, he was expelled from the country, and according to the NKVD agent Julius Hecker, the episode prompted the draconian decree against homosexuality which Stalin pushed through the same year. Not surprisingly, the story sent a ‘frisson’ round left-wing literary circles on Ashleigh’s return to Britain.

The sequel is also illuminating. Though Ashleigh’s relations with the CPGB now become rather unclear, he evidently did not become entirely persona non grata. Immediately he can be found contributing to the communist-edited Left Review and during the war years conducted speak-
he was killing his wife who was 20 years younger than him. What was he to do.

3. The husband of the lady Clemens (Dutt) is living with came to consult me as to the next steps.

4. Comrades who have been discharged came to consult me as to how they were to live.

5. A woman comrade whose husband had been described in a fraction meeting as a f—— bastard came to consult me. 185

The CPGB did not go out of its way to associate itself with bigamy and sexual mania, but within its ranks there is relatively little evidence of sexual intolerance after the 1920s and Dutt’s ‘old distinctions’ of private and political life did not entirely lose their meaning even in the party autobiographies.

The CPGB will not be remembered as a refuge of sexual outlaws. Nevertheless, it is presented in this guise by the biographer of the lesbian writer, Sylvia Townsend Warner, who describes communism as conferring a blessing on her marriage with Valentine Ackland, so that ‘rather than being slightly outcast, they could move themselves beyond the conventional altogether’.186 Decades later, Elizabeth Wilson, who came to the party via the women’s and gay liberation movements, claimed to find communists more open than her younger radical friends, accepting without self-consciousness her ‘marriage-like relationship with another woman’.187 These too are only partial pictures. Wilson’s 1970s’ Islington was not typical of the party’s history, while for Ackland and Townsend Warner, shuttling between Dorset and literary London, sexual latitudinarianism was no doubt to be relied upon than in its industrial strong-holds. Even in Cambridge, Hobsbawm notes, ‘one did not advertise membership of the Homintern’.188 But then where in British society did one advertise such matters?

**Double lives**

If exemplary lives were the public face of communism, double lives by their very nature were its hidden and even inadmissible underside. In popular images of western communism, particularly during the Cold War, few ideas carried more weight than the conspiracy and duplicity of the reds proverbially under the bed. According to Willi Münzenberg’s recent biographer, the Comintern itself was the ‘greatest terrorist conspiracy’ of the twentieth century and precursor of the Islamic threat of our own times.189 A communist party like Italy’s, enjoying unusual
electoral legitimacy, was often described in terms of doppiezza or double-dealing, in which seeming constitutionalism was merely the cover for continuing hopes of revolution. In countries like Britain, Münzenberg's special device of the front organisation provided the main mechanism of subterfuge and insinuation, appropriating the language and aspirations of surrounding 'innocents' to advance the unavowed ambitions of the communists who secured the key administrative positions. Here dissimulation was the test of leadership, and 'comrade' a sort of secret password, while the language of the innocents was never more than an instrument. Orwell, of course, described it as doublethink, while a practitioner recalled it as a 'deliberate and total deception' in which the communists' public pronouncements 'never at any time [bore] any relation whatsoever to their real aims as expounded in their text-books and as taught in the privacy of their members' study classes'.

Though generalised throughout the party, the extreme expression of this duality or doppiezza was the double life of the mole, the spy or the 'crypto-communist', whose ubiquity remains the fixation of the 'secret world' school of communist historiography. Nevertheless, the very concept of infiltration, though so different in associations from the Fabians' 'permeation', is freighted with ambiguities. In contemporary polemics, and sometimes in academic accounts, it involves the construction of communism as an 'outside' presence, bringing in alien values and loyalties like a Stalinist version of the Midwich Cuckoos. If communists were not 'born' outside, at least they could be tolerated by the Labour Party even at an official level. Within industry, the Labour Federation, and its adhesion to a broadly communist policy, was one of its more active members took the bait until at last Hyde was able to convene a special meeting at which their covert identities were collectively revealed. Hyde described this as a typical case of infiltration, albeit a model of its kind, and like so much else in his account its basic accuracy has since been amply confirmed. Although individual cases of undercover membership of the Labour Party can be traced as far back as 1929, the sustained campaign to which Hyde referred dated only from 1937. Even so, by the following year dual membership amounted to almost a fifth of the CPGB's entire membership, including fractions in virtually every divisional Labour Party in the London area. Especially in the youth and student movement, susceptible to the latest currents of opinion, broad platforms could be constructed entirely of open or concealed communists. The Labour League of Youth was not only difficult to distinguish from the YCL but in 1939 largely disappeared into it. Until 1940, the open acceptance of communists within the University Labour Federation, and its adhesion to a broadly communist policy, was tolerated by the Labour Party even at an official level. Within industry, Richard Croucher has made the point that communist shopfloor activists, so far from having 'infiltrated' the engineering unions, had 'rebuilt them from the shells they had been in the Depression' and gained considerable credibility on precisely these grounds. Far from requiring rebuilding by the communists, the Labour Party enjoyed significant membership growth over the course of the 1930s. Nevertheless, the wartime collapse of the LLY, which in 1939 had had 276 branches, does suggest that communist sympathies were quite strongly entrenched, and the same was true of certain divisional parties.

Hyde's account was therefore typical in this second sense too, that the infiltration he described was a process largely comprising the defection to communism of existing Labour Party members. In contrast to Hyde himself, the great majority of the CPGB's undercover members appear to have joined the Labour Party either before or more or less simultaneously with their adhesion to communism. Except in cases of inter-regional migration or on returning from university, they could hardly
have infiltrated very effectively had this not been the case, and the active concealment of an existing political affiliation and circle of contacts was the exception rather than the rule. At the same time, extensive common ground between the communists and many Labour activists meant that in practice there was little constraint on the expression of current communist policy, including support for the USSR. In the case of Ted Willis, who as the LLY’s general secretary was to head the exodus of communists in 1939, the complaint of Labour loyalists had been that already he comported himself exactly like a communist and made no secret of his support for communist-sponsored campaigns. In cases like this, the expressive functions of political allegiance were hardly even attenuated and a sense of group loyalty, often of a distinctly generational character, was as powerfully felt as if expressed through open party membership. Nevertheless, the higher the level of penetration, the greater the sense of subterfuge, and it is noteworthy that Willis himself decades later was among those continuing to conceal the fact of his covert party membership in the 1930s.

Even where affiliations were sedulously concealed, a sense of identification with the cause to be espoused was frequently the condition or at least the legitimation of undercover work. Percy Timberlake was a self-confessed ‘mole’ in the League of Nations Union, who on graduating from Oxford in 1938 found a full-time position there as what he confessed ‘mole’ in the League of Nations Union, who on graduating from Oxford in 1938 found a full-time position there as what he described as a ‘peace bureaucrat’. Already a student communist, he was initially drawn by the anti-war and internationalist aspects of communism and claimed that it was only on the basis of such a commitment that initially he quit student unionism with the cause to be espoused was frequently the condition or at least the legitimation of undercover work. Nevertheless, the higher the level of penetration, the greater the sense of subterfuge, and it is noteworthy that Willis himself decades later was among those continuing to conceal the fact of his covert party membership in the 1930s.

It was from these circles that Burgess, Maclean and the Cambridge spies were recruited, and the double lives they embarked upon suggest an obvious extension of such habits of conspiracy and deception. Few communists ever repudiated them and there were no reported waves of repudiation and resignation, either on the exposure in the 1950s of Burgess and Maclean, or on the earlier conviction for spying of the CPGB’s national organiser, Douglas Springhall. Pollitt, in his memoirs in 1940, even made a point of professing his friendship for Percy Glading, who was then in prison for espionage 203. Kieran, almost a half century later, saluted the idealism of his comrade Guy Burgess in an article exposing what he saw as the reactionary discourse of national ‘treason’. 204 George Barnard, another Cambridge contemporary, recalled being initially repelled by Burgess’s languid attitude and cut-glass accent. ‘When he graduated from the university, I heard that he was working for the Conservative Central Office and I remember saying, “that’s just what I thought the bastard would do.”’ This, then, and not spying for the Russians, was what Barnard would have regarded as treason. ‘Not knowing, of course, the real reason, I’ve always felt that I owed him an apology.’

In terms of communist canons of morality, what mattered was less the degree of deception than who was being deceived. Setting aside the class enemy or the British state, infiltration even of an organisation like the ILP, with which the CPGB formally professed a sort of common purpose, could serve the express function of undermining a political rival from within. Similarly, when rivalry with leftist organisations degenerated into open hostility, communist plants or contacts were evidently used as a source of information and internal documents. As in everything else, distinctions mattered and there can be no adequate conflation of these varied forms of activity. On the other hand, the links between them mattered too, and in the elevation of the party’s higher interests one thing easily led to another. Springhall was a case in point.207 Active as a naval rating in the revolutionary agitations on the lower deck after the First World War, his progression within the CPGB was sealed as a Lenin School student from 1928–31, an organiser in the party’s Tyneside and London districts, a political commissar in Spain and an editor of the Daily Worker. Already in the midst of these public activities, Springhall is said to have played an active role in hunting out political deviationists and on returning from another spell in Moscow in 1939 was among those instrumental in Pollitt’s removal as general secretary. It was at this point that he became the CPGB’s national organiser, and as well as providing military secrets to the Russians, one may be sure that he was also a source of information on the internal politics and leadership of the party itself. Though expelled from the party on being sentenced to seven years for espionage, there was little to suggest any...
fundamental discrepancy between these different forms of activity. Serving four and a half years of his sentence, Springhall then worked in Eastern Europe and China before dying in Moscow just a few months after Stalin, in September 1953.

Pride, stubbornness, subjectivism

Student reports from the Lenin School show that attributes of ‘initiative’, ‘independent thinking’ and ‘political sharpness’ frequently shaded into the ‘petty bourgeois’ vices of individualism and subjectivism. Conversely, the higher virtues of ‘discipline’ and ‘vigilance’ could coexist with tendencies to be ‘rigid’ or ‘inflexible’, and the ‘good proletarian…collective worker’ might be found found displaying ‘insufficient self-reliance’ or a problem with ‘grasping concrete facts’. Frequently the complaint was made that the school’s characterisations were hopeless as a guide to the students’ suitability for political work in Britain, and that some of those rated most poorly turned out to be among the party’s ‘best comrades’. William Cowe, a railwayman and ex-ILPer from Rutherglen, received a damning report highlighting his ‘serious lack of understanding of Bolshevik discipline, vigilance and self-criticism’, attributed to ‘strong remnants of petty-bourgeois individualism and traditions of the labour aristocracy’ and manifested in an attitude towards the school of a ‘shop steward in a capitalist factory’. Nevertheless, on the of the labour aristocracy and manifested in an attitude towards the party would be strong enough not only to get people elected to union positions but to ‘smash’ them if they did not ‘conform’. In reality, the CPGB was never really strong enough to ‘smash’ anybody, and between the early 1930s and the party’s disintegration in the 1980s there were very few expulsions of key industrial activists.

Even those that did take place were not widely publicised as an example to others. In Bob Lovell’s case, an expulsion effected at district level of a ‘slave mentality’ by teachers who ‘suppresse[d] any tendency to individuality or rebelliousness by force’. Penetier and Pudal point out that the smooth functioning of a communist party depended on such qualities being displayed solely in relation to the outside world. Even so, the delineation of roles was no easy matter and qualities of discipline and defiance all too often gave rise to tensions and dissatisfaction within the party. Marian Jessop was another Lenin School student who had had an early induction into the labour movement. Where, however, Cowe at the start of the war described his unconditional acceptance to whatever policy the Comintern decided, Jessop reacted rather differently: ‘When the bosses have spoken to me like that, either accept these conditions or… I have always challenged the “or” and I feel very much like that in this situation.’ Pollitt, who felt much the same way, recounted in his memoirs immediately afterwards how as a young boilermaker he had refused to pay for spoiled work even at the expense of losing his job, earning his father’s grudging accolade: ‘“Tha’s a stubborn b—, but tha did reet.”’ Pointedly, the purpose of the anecdote was said to be to demonstrate ‘a streak in my character which people sometimes find difficult to understand’.

Instincts to challenge the ‘or’ were most effective when reinforced by personal or organisational resources acquired beyond the party itself. Penetier and Pudal refer to this relative recalcitrance as ‘critical distance’, and describe how in France it gave rise to successive purges of leaders who had acquired their own ‘cultural and political capital’ through participation in the Resistance or other forms of mass political activity. Through communist domination of union confederations and other social movements, access to these independent resources was possibly more restricted in France than in Britain, and party discipline as a consequence more effectively underpinned. In 1929 Sam Elsbury was expelled from the party and manoeuvred from the leadership of the breakaway United Clothing Workers’ Union (UCWU), for arguing that it should ‘map out its own course without direction from the Party’. However, as one of only two breakaway unions ever launched by the CPGB, this was exceptional. In 1924 Pollitt looked to the day when the party would be strong enough not only to get people elected to union positions but to ‘smash’ them if they did not ‘conform’. In reality, the CPGB was never really strong enough to ‘smash’ anybody, and between the early 1930s and the party’s disintegration in the 1980s there were very few expulsions of key industrial activists.

Even those that did take place were not widely publicised as an example to others. In Bob Lovell’s case, an expulsion effected at district level
marked by a succession of alleged transgressions. Among them were Saklatvala's second stint in parliament. His remaining with the communists despite their expulsion was belied by his remaining with the communists. The commission claimed that he was 'a Party man, last, not first', and though leverage within the party, it cannot have made him less susceptible to the discipline on some matters and [who] when any problem involved his industrial position... would not budge for anyone or any Party', actually had his expulsion overturned after a bitter row with the Lancashire district. Though ETU leaders were expelled after the 1961 ballot-rigging scandal, for years beforehand King Street had not so much been directing the operations as seemingly impotent to intervene. One case that was pushed further was that of the Coventry AEU activist Ernie Roberts, expelled on grounds of 'individualistic' methods of work in 1941. However, the sequel is equally instructive, for in carrying on to become a national AEU official and a Labour MP, Roberts by all conventional criteria was the beneficiary of his expulsion. Discipline in such circumstances could hardly be comprehensive, and by the post-war period King Street was almost always ready to trade a diminution of control for an extension of influence.

For the CPGB's later decades, such an assessment is now all but uncontested among British labour historians. Even for the Comintern period, the limits to party discipline may be illustrated by the expulsions which never took place of three of the CPGB's best known leaders of the inter-war years, Shapurji Saklatvala, Wal Hannington and Arthur Horner. As a communist MP, unemployed activist and trade unionist respectively, all took critical distance to the point that their party membership was thrown into question, but in each case remained within its ranks. Though each put up with a good deal in the course of this, party discipline was not continuously effective in any of the cases. Certainly the CPGB did not have the luxury of a whips' office. Over its entire existence, Saklatvala was one of only five communist MPs, including the maverick L'Estrange M alone, who in 1918 was elected as a Coalition Liberal before adopting a wildly inflammatory communist stance which landed him in gaol for sedition. Even Saklatvala, the MP for Battersea North, was initially elected on a Labour ticket before being re-elected as communist with the support of his local Labour Party in 1924. Whether or not being the sole communist MP increased his leverage within the party, it cannot have made him less susceptible to the pressure of parliamentary conventions. In 1924, the party control commission claimed that he was 'a Party man, last, not first', and though this was belied by his remaining with the communists despite their exclusion from the Labour Party, Saklatvala's second stint in parliament was marked by a succession of alleged transgressions. Among them were his bizarre policy of a boycott of taxable goods to defeat the 1927 Trades Disputes Act; his failure to consult with local communists when invited to address the Durham Miners' Gala; advocating the withholding of the Labour Party political levy in defiance of party policy; and addressing a Berlin convention of the Inter-Parliamentary Union against the express wishes of the KPD. In 1928 he even offered such fulsome congratulations to the retiring Liberal Speaker as to bring cheers from both sides of the house. 'I consider your speech as an insult... to the Party to which you belong', Arnot wrote to him from Moscow, and that same year the British delegation at the Comintern's Sixth World Congress formally moved Saklatvala's expulsion from the party.

In contrast to France, where even the charismatic Driot could be brutally expunged without the loss of his local fiefdom, Saklatvala did not owe his seat to the communist party—his agent was not even a party sympathiser—but rather the reverse was true. As Pollitt pointed out, his 'vacillations and opportunism' had to be set against his influence not only in Battersea but nationally, and even those complaining of his behaviour acknowledged his ability to draw audiences which no district speaker could. Gamely invoking the necessity of thinking on his feet, Saklatvala headed off his critics and in 1929 was dismissed not by them but by his Battersea constituents. Within months, CPGB membership in the constituency had fallen from seventy to less than a dozen. By the time of Saklatvala's death, he had been succeeded as sole communist MP by William Gallacher, a more orthodox figure whom Andrew Thorpe has nevertheless demonstrated was also forced to respond independently to the split-second imperatives of the debating chamber. On such occasion, the Daily Worker's Paris correspondent even had to deliver a conciliatory bunch of flowers to the L'Humanite journalist Gabriel Péri when Gallacher spontaneously repudiated him in the Commons.

Wal Hannington's personal capital derived from his symbiotic relationship with the National Unemployed Workers' Movement. Hearing Hannington speak in Wigan in 1936, Orwell described him as 'a poor speaker... with the wrong kind of cockney accent (once again, though a Communist, entirely a bourgeois)'. Denis Healey also records that in 1929, when Gallacher spontaneously repudiated him in the Commons.
bureaucrats, and bore the record of his own several imprisonments like medals from the class war. To his mastery of the demonstrative effect of such confrontations he added a genius for adapting workshop forms of struggle and organisation to the new condition of unemployment faced by so many militants between the wars. Quite properly, Aneurin Bevan described it as a challenge of ‘quite peculiar complexity’ to attempt to give ‘organisational expression to circumstances from which men are trying desperately to escape’. In a longer historical perspective, Hannington’s success in meeting this challenge, establishing an organisation whose paying membership was at one point five times higher than the CPGB’s, is without any obvious parallel.

Within the party, his successes earned him not plaudits but a barrage of criticism because of the supposedly ‘legalistic’, trade-union type methods on which they were based. In April 1930, a central committee resolution complained that ‘all hostile elements to the Party have rallied to the NUWM’, and a year later Hannington himself was described by the CPGB’s Comintern representative as ‘a real danger’ who needed removing. Already in 1929 he had defied the platform at the eleventh CPGB congress to secure re-election to the party executive, and although removed in 1932 because of his ‘most stubborn and solid resistance’ to Comintern policy on organising the unemployed, his position at the head of the NUWM was apparently unassailable. Indeed, it secured his return to the party executive in 1935, and then once again his removal.

What is more remarkable is that Hannington’s pronounced individualism as a leader was not only tolerated but presently sanctioned, publicised and even exploited by the party. In France, Pennetier and Pudal have shown how in standard party lives the individual was entirely subsumed within the party. Moreover, according to the inventory which they present, Thorez’s Fils du peuple, while exemplifying these traits, was the only authorised communist memoir published during Thorez’s lifetime, hence confirming the reciprocal identification of party and leader. In France, Thorez’s memoir was not only tolerated but presently sanctioned, publicised and even exploited by the party. In 1936 as almost the first biographical representation of communist leadership in Britain. Though Hannington’s individuality is not entirely obliterated—‘with a straight left to the face, and a right cross to the jaw, I put the beachcomber down for the count’, he boasts of a Hamburg fistfight—what is more significant is how his primary identification in the text is not with the party, which is barely mentioned, but with the broader unemployed movement. ‘I am a member of the Communist Party, and proud of my associations, but I hold my office as organiser as elected by the branches of the movement’, he claims, in one of the several court cases which he describes. Though the immediate point was one of his wider legitimacy, in the context of the bitter internal disputes in which he had been involved, it also offers the clue to Hannington’s relative independence from the party.

If Pollitt cautioned against alienating Hannington in 1931, it was not because he agreed with his perspective for the NUWM, but because it seemed impossible to jeopardise relations with the party’s ‘one mass organisation with a real paying membership’ when it was already at loggerheads with its most influential trade unionist, Arthur Horner.

Like Hannington, Horner in the early 1930s was exceptional in the extent of his influence beyond the party—a political formation predating that of the party, and by the especially strong pull of union and community loyalism in the relative industrial monoculture of the South Wales coalfield. A protégé of the R hondd syndicalist Noah Ablett and briefly chair of the Unofficial Reform Committee, Horner retained from syndicalism not only a commitment to the unity and cohesion of the miners’ organisation but a critique of political bureaucracy owing much to his early reading of The Miner’s Next Step. In his memoirs, Horner described it as one of his ‘greatest advantages’ that he ‘never became a professional revolutionary’, and repeatedly during his career showed either reluctance to sit on the party’s leading bodies or a disinclination to participate in those of which he was formally a member. Partly, this was the problem of multiple commitments, with Horner always ready with ‘good excuses…of why trade union engagements prevent [him] from attending Party meetings’. However, Horner also displayed a definite aversion to the party bureaucracy, alleging in 1928 that it exploited privileged contacts with Moscow precisely because of its utter dispensability as regards the struggle in Britain. Three years later he characterised his colleagues in the South Wales leadership as ‘machines that only exist to say “yes” to everything that the centre does’.

In 1931, when Horner’s defiance of party instructions brought him to the brink of expulsion, formally speaking it was he who recanted and party discipline which prevailed. However, the longer term significance
of the episode was to mark out the space within which, in all decisive
industrial affairs, Horner henceforth followed his own counsel, or his
union’s, but not the party’s against the union’s. This was clearly displayed
in the early part of the war, when he declined to use his influence for anti-
war ends, and did so with seeming impunity. Indeed, the boot was on the
other foot: when in this period the party refused to support Horner’s
stance on the union’s wage negotiations, the possibility that arose was of
his resignation, not expulsion, and for a period he virtually broke off
contact with the ‘Comrades’ in the district office.246
When he later became general secretary of the NUM, his Cardiff
leaving reception was treated to a new version of My Bonnie Lies Over the
Ocean:

For Arthur the war proved no muddle
Whatever old King Street did say
He kept clear of their huddle
And that’s where he stands to this day.247

As significant as Horner’s independent-mindedness was the open, even
exemplary quality with which it was being presented as early as 1947.
Equally with party mythology, an informal counter-mythology buttressed
conceptions of effective communist leadership, but precisely on the basis
of that critical distance which Horner would have told you was its first
precondition.

Only one Harry Pollitt?

That these outstanding personalities were politically formed before the
communist party existed was not fortuitous. Walking into King Street
during the 1964 general election, the journalist Anthony Howard noted
how the prominent bust of Pollitt highlighted the most obvious deficiency
of the party he left behind—‘its complete lack of any figure with a
personal identity of his own’.248 Cynics even muttered that his successor
John Gollan took the cult of impersonality too far.249 A recruit from the
party’s heyday, linking the dissipation of the party’s ‘spirit and enthusi-
asm’ with the absence of any subsequent figure of Pollitt’s stature,
wondered already in 1960 whether the ‘“historic role” of the British
Party was fulfilled within the span of his leadership’.250 Though everywhere communists continued to play out their smaller historical roles, the
lack of any commanding public figure seemed to symbolise the passing of
an era.

Perhaps there was one last throwback to the past. Jimmy Reid was
born in Glasgow in 1932, first coming to notice as one of the leaders of
the engineering apprentices’ strikes of 1951. By 1958 he was drawn by
Gollan into full-time party work and had some success in revitalising the
YCL before making an effective Scottish party secretary from 1964 to
1969. It is nevertheless revealing that it was only when at this point Reid
returned to the shipyards that he began to make his mark with a wider
public. More than anything, he became inseparably identified with the
Upper Clyde Shipbuilders work-in, which by both word and deed
proposed an alternative political economy to that of the ‘faceless men
running Britain from Whitehall and the City.251 In their study of the
work-in, Foster and Woolfson stress how brilliantly Reid employed his
mastery of the spoken word, drawing upon ‘CP practice as it evolved
during the 1930s and 1940s’ to use “theme”, the construction of
contexts and the deployment of emotions, to transform received mean-
ing’.252 Like a communist pageant or one of Lewis Jones’s novels, their
account is constantly punctuated by demonstrative showpieces, whether
altercations with union officials, carnival-like demonstrations in
Glasgow’s George Square or Reid’s refusal to shake the hand of the
Conservative industry minister which, in Foster and Woolfson’s words,
‘ratified the nature of the battle’.253

Defying the passing of the orator-hero, Reid is the one leading figure
of his generation whose platform presence was singled out by one of the
Manchester interviewees as the cause of their joining the party.254 Even
beyond the party’s ranks, he was a popular Clydebank councillor and
easily the most effective communist candidate in the 1974 general elec-
tions, where he underplayed the claims of party and stood as the ‘Man
For the Job’ unanswerable to any party whip. ‘People Need Jimmy’, his
literature blazoned. ‘I am not a communist but I would be proud to have
Jimmy as my MP’, said an admirer. All his local endorsements referred
to him as Jimmy, unconsciously echoing the references to ‘Harry’ in
Pollitt’s equally individualised election literature of forty years earlier.255

In any other party, Reid would have made an obvious leadership
candidate. Approaching Pollitt’s age when he became general secretary,
he had been marked out in the 1960s as Gollan’s possible successor, as
Gollan had by Pollitt before him.256 What finally stood in the way of such
a prospect is not absolutely clear. Already when he resigned as Scottish
secretary, Reid complained of the constant struggle simply to keep the
party going, of a tired, faded cadre force, branches with all the life
kicked out of them and the serious health problems of many party offi-
cials.257 Subsequently, even despite the party’s support, Reid was unsuc-
successful in running for election as an AEU national officer. Remaining on the national executive out of loyalty to Gollan, Reid at last resigned in 1976 citing no reason that would not have been applicable at any time in the previous twenty years.\(^{258}\)

Perhaps Gollan’s resignation as general secretary only months earlier removed the last call on his personal loyalty. Possibly too, the line of succession acted as a catalyst, as Gollan made way for Reid’s fellow Glaswegian Gordon M Lennan, a party worker since the age of twenty-five but one with little personal standing independent of the apparatus. ‘I don’t think my secretaryship will differ at all from Mr Gollan’s, in the sense that I will be… carrying out the policies laid down by the national Congress’, M Lennan stated on taking up the position, like one of the faceless men from King Street.\(^{259}\) Resigning three months later, Reid pointedly remarked that ‘the political parties of the labour movement cannot go on as in the past… plagued by little men consumed by career ambitions and leaders without vision’.\(^{260}\) In a volume of autobiography published the same year, he described with implicit force of contrast how the communist leaders of his youth had been ‘leaders in their own right’, authentic products of ‘the struggle of the British people’.\(^{261}\) If the double-edged sword of leadership had at last been laid to rest, it was at the expense of the CPGB’s wider pretensions to a leadership role.

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CHAPTER 4

TRUE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF THE BRITISH WORKING CLASS

Jack Owen was a syndicalist of the old school. A Ruskin College rebel, Plebs League organiser and ASE delegate to Tom Mann’s 1910 conference on industrial syndicalism, as late as 1920 he wrote a pamphlet, To Engineers (and other wage slaves), betraying little interest either in parties in general or ‘the party’ then in process of formation. Although a wartime shop steward and veteran of the Manchester and London district committees of his union, it was not until 1929 that he took on his first overtly political responsibility, as election agent to the former syndicalist A.A. Purcell in Moss Side. Indeed, it was as late as 1936, the year of Mann’s eightieth birthday extravaganza, that Owen now followed him a second time in joining the communist party. In line with current party strategies he did not even then make public his adhesion, but secured election as a Labour councillor in his native Manchester. Advertised as such, in 1940 he began writing a weekly column for the \textit{Daily Worker} and was made a member of its new, largely ceremonial editorial board.

Though Owen’s delayed adhesion to communism was relatively unusual, the continuities between syndicalist and communist conceptions of political agency were of wider significance. Offsetting the usurpation of effective workers’ control by the Soviet state, communists retained the image of the worker as the demiurge of the social revolution, personified in a leader like Pollitt, or Stalin, and in the virile representations of the \textit{Daily Worker} cartoonist Gabriel. In one of his own ‘workshop talks’ for the paper, Owen captured the image in the shape of a communist foundry worker, vividly delineated against the white heat of the furnace.

Beads of sweat, catching glancing flame, created highlights that gave added emphasis to the taut shoulders. Huge muscles balled as he thrust steel into the seething centre. Statuesque, he was the embodiment of proletarian power.
Some day, Owen went on, the ‘gleaming shoulders’ and ‘heavily veined arms’ would tear capitalism asunder. This was socialism as the creed of the ‘producer’, exactly as Owen had expounded it as a syndicalist. Its forms of struggle and participation were shaped accordingly.1

Another image may be set alongside it. In the late 1920s, Frieda Brewster was a Pittsburgh YCLer helping out on the picket lines of breadline America. Steeped in the rhetoric and imagery of the struggle, she could not help being overawed by the fearless local party organiser, a former miner and steelworker called Pat Devine. A leading member in turn of the British, American and Irish communist parties, Devine had the toughness, bravery and commitment synonymous with the communist leadership ideal. ‘He took on the police, the city officials, even the mayor when the occasion arose’, Brewster recalled. ‘I invested him with all the glamour many girls of my age saw in filmstars and there grew in me a kind of hero worship for him.’ Exactly as in a screenplay, her revolutionary heartthrob even offered his hand in marriage, only to reveal an aspect of the male psyche that neither Hollywood nor the New York Daily Worker had prepared her for. Deeply moulded by his Catholic upbringing, Devine as a husband was not only incapable of physical or emotional intimacy but oblivious to the idea of comradeship or equality between the sexes. ‘He made it clear, without so many words, that I was to make his meals, provide clean shirts and be “available” in bed if he so desired’, Brewster recalled. Without so many words, he also made the larger decisions—such as going to live in Moscow—that shaped the life they shared. Devine was also unmindful of his own personal interests, and when a fifteen-year jail sentence for his part in the Lawrence textile strike was commuted to deportation to his native Scotland, he never dreamt of opting for a more comfortable life: ‘He may have been a rotten husband’, said his wife, ‘but he was a damn good communist.’ Perhaps this too, in a way which was not solely directed against the sources of oppression, was an embodiment of proletarian power.2

Between the icon and the reality there was a common denominator. Communism as a creed of emancipation was meant to transcend the division of the sexes while providing an answer to women’s oppression in the vision of a classless society. In reality, these images confirm what many communist women themselves came to appreciate: that ‘the centre of its stage [was] occupied by Man’.3 Alike in its models of activism, its proletarian machismo, its focus on the workplace and its preoccupation with particular heavy industrial sectors, this was a movement reserving its vanguard roles for the male sex. In that, of course, it was a product of its own potential sources of recruitment, exactly as Devine was a product of his upbringing and environment as well as political affiliations. More than that, however, communism itself as a political formation both replicated the sexual division of labour and authority that characterised its core constituencies, and depended upon these for the separate sphere that party activism itself constituted. If, as Dominique Loiseau has suggested, the very functioning and survival of the activist depended on the moral and material support of an uncomplaining partner, then the communist as quintessential activist naturally demanded this support to an unusual degree.4 Combined with an equalitarian rhetoric differing widely in immediacy of application, these dependencies made for varied patterns of relationships that were shaped by the impact of distinct regional and occupational cultures as well as changing constructions of gender over time and the diverse ambitions and expectations of communist women themselves.

Many of these communist women did not challenge the unsung supporting role of what Loiseau calls militantes de l’ombre. Among those determined on a more active contribution, a further differentiation is necessary between those securing a space as ‘honorary’ male comrades and those exploiting openings to a more feminised style of politics. Though largely accepting the party’s organisational and programmatic hierarchies, these women challenged gendered stereotypes by their own example while never entirely lacking a critical vocabulary of their own. Due perhaps to its relative embeddedness within the structures and cultures of the established labour movement, there was little evidence within the CPGB of the explicit challenge to ‘male chauvinism’ posed in the US party already by the late 1940s.5 Nevertheless, even where traditional priorities seemingly ruled supreme, one finds support for recent emphases on the wider persistence of a feminist consciousness between the first and second waves of feminism.6 Isabel Brown was a prominent women’s activist, though not a feminist, and yet on her fiftieth birthday the party saluted her as ‘a living reply to those... who would deny to women the full and equal place they should occupy in progressive society’.7 There were many others of whom this might have been said, while conversely even critics of the party from a feminist perspective sometimes acknowledged the relative scope for personal development which it provided. Dorothy Kuya was a black party activist from Liverpool who came to regard the CPGB’s record on both race and gender as greatly inferior to that of communist parties and regimes elsewhere. Nevertheless she spoke highly of the party’s education, cadre development and informal mentorship in the post-war years, ‘as good as any university’ and yet accessible in a way that a university was not.8
Even so, for women of Kuya’s generation it took the challenge of second-wave feminism to de-centre the Man at the centre of communism. For the hero of the Lawrence strike to be depicted in other than heroic terms required not just the attenuation of internal codes of discipline but an awakened feminist consciousness which to some older communist women felt like the scales dropping from their eyes. ‘Even those among us who had vague feminist leanings, we didn’t articulate them, we hadn’t the vocabulary’, one of them recalled. Whether signifying the insight, the authenticity or the plasticity of memory, one finds described in such testimonies forms of relationship for which at the time the words could literally not be found.

**Cadres and supporters**

In his work on German communism, Eric Weitz has emphasised the movement’s ‘masculinist’ characteristics, whether expressed in its social composition, its leadership, its campaigning priorities or a sinewy iconography very much akin to Owen’s. Weitz also notes that the KPD’s electorate contained proportionately fewer women than the other major Weimar parties, a phenomenon the more significant in being replicated by the largest non-ruling communist parties of the post-war period, the PCF and the PCI. In respect of the party membership, the imbalance was greater still.

The CPGB fits comfortably into such a picture. In 1927 a census covering two-thirds of party locals established that around 14 per cent of party members were women, with the highest proportions in the London and M anchester districts (22 and 19 per cent) and the lowest on Tyne side (8 per cent). Superficially, the British figure compares quite favourably with contemporary figures for other communist parties: 20 per cent for Czechoslovakia; 15–17 per cent for Germany, slightly less for Switzerland and Australia, and falling to 2 per cent or lower in France and Italy. M oreover, it is almost certainly not lower than that for antecedents of the CPB like the SDF. Even so, given the crude correlation between these figures and national variations in women’s legal and political status, the CPGB’s record appears somewhat less than impressive, and Britain’s mainstream political parties had female memberships in the order of 40 to 50 per cent. Attending a PCF conference in 1923, Tom Bell noted that ‘the women of France are backward, they have no political rights and the men do not seem even in the Party very much disposed to encourage the women’s movement’. T hough neither women nor the general political culture in Britain were as ‘backward’ in the sense that Bell intended, the CPGB’s record also left a good deal to be desired and in 1922 it was ‘severely reprimanded’ on this score at the Comintern’s Fourth World Congress. To some extent, this arose from its preoccupation with heavy industrial sectors almost as fully closed to women as the pre-1918 electoral register. However, it also reflected the distinctive conception of the cadre party. In larger British parties, including the CPGB’s nearest rival the ILP, a significant women’s presence diminished to near invisibility in leadership roles. T hough Labour’s burgeoning women’s sections were numerically impressive, and in Pollitt’s estimation ‘the best organised section’ of the Labour Party, to their critics they seemed to function as ‘permanent Social Committee, or O fficial cake-maker’ rather than as a genuine vehicle for women’s political participation. Communists, as we shall see, did not dispense with traditional conceptions of the woman as cake-maker. O n the other hand, because they conceived of party membership itself as a form of leadership, the CPGB offered relatively little scope for more passive or ancillary forms of affiliation such as provided by other parties with a mass female membership.

This distinction is therefore a crucial one. In her pioneering work on the CPGB’s women members, Sue Bruley broadly characterised them as either ‘cadres’ or ‘supporters’, and it is evident that the more the party leaned towards a cadre conception of membership, the less likely mere ‘supporters’ were to meet its conditions of membership. Even for men, domestic commitments were cited as one of the major obstacles to party recruitment, though there was more explicit discrimination too: on entering the party with the rest of the Mansfield SLP in 1922, Rose Smith recalled being singled out for a form of probationary membership, and as a housewife with small children had to ‘fight for 12 months’ to obtain a party card. Nevertheless, what was ultimately more significant was the depreciation of the role of ‘supporters’, and the setting of strenuous membership conditions which excluded them, without the party in any way becoming less dependent on the women who fulfilled this role.

Bolstered by but outliving the influx of women into paid employment during the war, it was therefore only in the course 1930s that the proportion of women party members began to rise: to around a quarter of the membership by 1945, and a third by the late 1950s. unquestionably this was assisted by the relaxation of membership requirements to accommodate different forms and levels of political participation, while providing the space for a feminised politics addressed directly to ‘women’s’ issues and experiences. O n the other hand, precisely this delineation of women’s issues has been criticised as a legitimisation of those life experiences, located...
within and reinforcing the separate but unequal spheres of a sexually divided society. In France, where this development was more pronounced than in Britain, Annie K riegel ascribed it to the displacement of the class struggle by a ‘closed society’ dominated by ‘administrative tasks’, whose image, style, and pace had become ‘increasingly assimilated to the functions women have exercised in a traditional society’. It was in this sense that she recorded that by the 1950s the PCF’s largest occupational category comprised those housewives, who, as she correctly observed, had been ‘practically nonexistent in working-class or revolutionary parties during the first half of the twentieth century’. 

More recently, Christine Bard and Jean-Louis Robert have referred to this as the displacement of the PCF’s original ‘feminism’ by the so-called ‘familialism’ it upheld from the period of the popular front. 

In Britain, at least in broad outlines, a similar development can be detected. In absolute terms, there were at least ten times as many women communists in the 1950s as in the CPGB’s formative years. A large majority of these were also housewives, and here too these constituted the party’s largest occupational grouping. Though attendance at a party school is a very crude indicator of ‘ cadre’ status, not least because of the special childcare arrangements it demanded, it is notable that for the first time women were now definitely less likely than men to attend such schools. Moreover, those who did so in many cases referred in their autobiographies to the difficulties or impracticality of sustaining political commitments while bringing up young children. The CPGB was not as ‘backward’ as the PCF; for example, it had no real equivalent of the Union des Jeunes Filles de France upholding conservative stereotypes of the ‘motherhood of tomorrow’. 

On the other hand, Tricia Davies has argued that in early post-war Britain a prevalent if less constrictive ideology of domesticity was to some extent reflected within the CPGB. In the recollection of a former Lancashire women’s organiser: ‘many [women] were registered as party members but only considered themselves as silent parties. Only housewives they would say...’

These distinctions, between cadres and supporters, feminism and ‘familialism’, thus provide a helpful framework in which to locate the gendered construction of the communist activist. However, neither is without its complications, and June Hannam and Karen Hunt have rightly warned that distinctions between ‘propagandists’ and ‘tea makers’ risk obscuring the extent to which individual women socialists might combine or move between different forms of participation according to changing issues and personal circumstances. 

Pamela Graves has noted how ‘small and intensely propagandist’ movements like the communist party had little choice but to draw on all their members’ time and skills ‘regardless of gender’, and particularly in the late 1930s, the immediacy of ‘struggle’ and ‘revolution’ for these young people meant relatively egalitarian forms of comradeship. 

In contrast to Auden, few communists remembered these as the flat-test years of their lives. Nevertheless, with fascism defeated, unemployment overcome and the comparative anti-climax of ‘affluence’ and the parliamentary road, it is not surprising that many communists shared the post-war mood of wanting something of their own private tomorrow. One lapsed member described it as ‘living full-time rather than politics full-time’. Another referred laconically to a ‘return to normality’. As the earlier bulge of recruits now provided the CPGB with its...
own post-war baby boom—the two dozen wartime employees of the Soviet Monitor generated ‘several bonny Soviet Monitor babies over the years’—men as well as women referred to the demands of marriage and children: ‘For one thing I was a family man’, explained the once ‘lean-and-hungry-looking... commissar’ of the Cambridge communists, and the pressures were greater still on the ‘family’ woman. Though few put it so directly, a wife…is a Party member & has done a very good job in many respects, ascribed her relative inactivity to the children she had had in the 1940s—‘and the fact that my husband is an active, leading party member with numerous, party and TU commitments’. This was characteristic. As a movement of young people whose egalitarianism had been based upon the absence of family ties rather than their successful accommodation, little of the 1930s’ generation’s radicalism had been directed towards the renegotiation of inter-personal relationships, nor had it particularly depended upon it. It was thus almost insensibly that post-war normality in one of its aspects came to mean the adoption of more conventional gender roles.

Too stark an opposition of feminism and familialism may thus obscure the extent to which what changed was not so much the prevailing attitude to family relationships as the way in which women were affected by these relationships and the greater likelihood of women who were so affected being found within the communist party. Some confirmation of this may be found in the motivations of women in joining the party. It is a commonplace in the literature on European socialist parties that the small numbers of women recruits were, at least, at rank-and-file level, predominantly ‘supporters’ of this type; that is, the ‘wives or daughters of male militants’. Moreover, there is ample evidence of such recruitment to the CPGB. ‘I find women who are in the Party just because their menfolk are, & content just to attend aggregate meetings etc & do nothing’, complained one unattached women’s activist as early as the 1920s. Specially after 1956, the recruitment of family members must have been a tempting contrivance as branches, areas and districts resorted to ‘mechanical’ methods to shore up flagging membership figures. Moreover, in many cases, these were not just passive supporters, but actively assisted their husbands in their work. ‘My wife... is a Party member & has done a very good job in many respects, as well as being a source of strength to myself by her assistance in the many and varied jobs I have had to do’, wrote a Scottish miner and party functionary in his party autobiography. Parenthetically he added: ‘Having joined the party immediately we were married, she always says it was so obviously a condition of marriage.’ Though few put it so directly, a number of project interviewees mentioned memberships of convenience, seen sometimes as supporting the party and sometimes a marriage.

Nevertheless, no general inference can be made that women recruits were militantes de l’ombre, recruited by, through and possibly for their male kinfolk. For example, while it is true that a greater proportion of women members had parents or elder siblings who were already party members, this is wholly attributable to the relatively small number of women recruited through the workplace or other public activities: among those brought up with communist relatives, there was no significant gender difference in the likelihood of their following relatives into the communist party. The one exception to this is that parents following children into the party appear to have been far more likely to have been the mother than the father. On the other hand, the far commoner phenomenon of the ‘party marriage’ was not usually that of a cadre and supporter. In two-thirds of the cases where we have the relevant data, both male and female partners were already communists before their marriage, and in a third of them the woman was the first to have joined the party. Given that two-thirds of party members had joined by the age of twenty-five, and found in its ranks a social environment as well as political identity, it is hardly remarkable that inter-marriage should have been so common. For most of those who entered into one, a party marriage was seen as a form of companionate marriage and a corollary of the notion of comradeship.

Again, if women were more likely to be found in such relationships, it was because it was far more difficult for a woman to envisage an active political commitment in the face of a partner’s opposition or mere lack of support. Compared with the many examples of men’s party autobiographies stating that their wives were not party members, only a handful of women were in the same position, in circumstances which implicitly confirm the hindrances to such independence which otherwise prevailed. Thus, there are only five such women on the Manchester database, compared with thirty-four men and several more cases where a wife’s non-membership can be inferred. Of the five women, one joined at the relatively late age of forty-one; another in 1943, when it is possible that her husband may have been in the forces; and the other three were divorced or separated. Whether marital break-up was the consequence or precondition of such commitments is not always stated, though one, Nell Vyse, was perfectly explicit: ‘Left husband over political disagreement re Finland, which was culmination of years of personal and political differences.’ Examples of deferred or interrupted membership can tell the same story. Grace Ebbett, the daughter of the veteran communist dockers’ leader Fred T. Thompson, put off joining the party until her husband also agreed to join. Another recruit described a first
and ‘over enthusiastic’ stint of membership in the mid-1930s, ‘when I… neglected my home which resulted in my having to give up altogether for a time’. Apparently there were no overtly political difficulties for she temporarily reverted to her original membership of the Labour Party before returning to the CPGB when in her mid-forties in 1943. It is not indicated whether this was due to changed personal circumstances—for example, her children having grown up—the relaxation of the party’s demands, or the relaxation of her husband’s. It is nevertheless clear that cases like that of ‘Red’ Fanny Deakin, whose non-political husband held that ‘one fighter in the family was enough’, were exceptional.

Men did not always escape the same dilemmas. In campaigns for a mass party in the 1920s, domestic pressures, often identified with ‘the wife’, loomed large as an impediment to recruitment. Only the threat of victimisation was mentioned more often, and that was especially a consideration for ‘family’ men. In 1925, after an abortive St Pancras ‘recruiting week’, it was explained that potential members objected ‘that the Party will take up too much of their time, that their wives do not want them to, etc’. Among those who did join, such considerations offer a different, ‘familial’ slant on the retreat into economism of the trade union communist. A 1930s’ recruit, conscious of being regarded as ‘the worst imaginable’, withdrew into activity at his place of work when his wife was born after the war.

The overall impression was ‘masculinist’ in the extreme. Men did not escape the same dilemmas. In campaigns for a mass party in the 1920s, domestic pressures, often identified with ‘the wife’, loomed large as an impediment to recruitment. Only the threat of victimisation was mentioned more often, and that was especially a consideration for ‘family’ men. In 1925, after an abortive St Pancras ‘recruiting week’, it was explained that potential members objected ‘that the Party will take up too much of their time, that their wives do not want them to, etc’. Among those who did join, such considerations offer a different, ‘familial’ slant on the retreat into economism of the trade union communist. A 1930s’ recruit, conscious of being regarded as ‘the worst father imaginable’, withdrew into activity at his place of work when his children were born after the war. An engineering worker joining in 1960, without the sense of ‘struggle’ and impending resolution that had been so palpable between the wars, invoked Gorki’s dictum that the revolution should never marry, but only to underline that his own life had been led according to entirely different precepts. Again, this was put in terms of a concentration on union work as well as family commitments, for in the ‘normal’ post-war division of labour, work itself was a sort of family commitment: the union and the factory were there every day, all day. It was part of your working life… because that was what provided you with your livelihood and that was your main interest.

Sometimes the negotiation of a modus vivendi involved intense personal conflict and ‘domestic crisis’, and sometimes, especially for women, tensions with the party itself. Often, party branches did little to accommodate the burdens of women with children, and party husbands not much more to share them. One workplace recruit of the 1930s even recalled the district organiser reproaching her on becoming pregnant with her fourth child in disregard of party obligations. Nevertheless, women in this period were at least encouraged to join the party. Accounts which stress the equal, non-gendered and endogamous relationships prevailing in a party like the early PCF do not adequately address the fact that in such organisations there might be as many as fifty male comrades to every female, suggesting the exceptionality of the female cadre and general prevalence of more traditional sexual relationships which simply were not captured within the institution. Equally, if housewives were virtually non-existent in the early communist parties, this was largely because women themselves were under-represented, and the three-quarters of the CPGB’s women’s membership who were housewives in the 1920s was still a figure broadly comparable with the two-thirds of women in the population as a whole. Perhaps the only certain way of not ‘assimilating’ to the functions of traditional society was by having nothing to do with it.

The issue is therefore more complex than is sometimes suggested. Though there were fewer of them, communist women joined the party for reasons as varied as their male counterparts, and in the majority of cases equally of their own independent volition. In this sense, they were more like cadres than supporters. On the other hand, negotiating the sort of relationship with the party that most men took for granted was an issue which for most of them, for longer or shorter periods of their lives, had to be resolved with male partners, as the personal and political converged in the distinctive and literal way that is peculiar to political activists. Moreover, the context for these negotiations was far from static. Over a period of continuous change both in the political culture of the communist party and in constructions of gender in British society, the character of these relationships inevitably changed considerably. By the time of its dissolution, the party was strongly influenced by the women’s movement, and stirrings of feminism can be detected at almost every point in its history. On the other hand, if we consider first the party’s earliest years, we find both resistance to the idea of women as cadres, and opposition to acceptance into the party of mere supporters. The overall impression was ‘masculinist’ in the extreme.

‘Wife deserters’

From the start there were dissenting voices. Born on the ebb tide of militant suffragism as well as the great industrial unrest, the CPGB was one of its incidental legatees both through Sylvia Pankhurst’s Workers’ Socialist Federation (WSF), which merged into the party in 1921, and the adhesion of individual socialist suffragists. Most prominent of the latter were the BSP’s Dora Montefiore and the ILP’s Helen Crawfurd, while the attempted ‘synthesis’ of socialism and feminism of George Lansbury was another possible influence. In her First World War memoir
Hone Front, Pankhurst described an entertainment put on for East End children, with Lansbury himself presenting a marionette show, along with his daughter Violet; Pankhurst’s secretary, Nellie Cohen; her sister Rose, ‘as slender as the lily she represented’; and the ex-suffragette Joan Beauchamp, ‘a stern stiff, young “Spirit of Peace”’ and later editor of the No Conscription Fellowship’s Tribunal. All except Lansbury went on to join the CPGB, and initially the continuities of approach were unmistakable. Thus in 1920, it was Lansbury’s son-in-law Albert Hawkins who proposed a universal rent strike as ‘the Armageddon of capitalism’, to be fought and won ‘largely [as] a housewives’ battle’.

Three years later, a similar conception can be detected in the communist housewives’ committees promoted by Helen Crawfurd, who as a militant suffragette joined the ILP at one of Lansbury’s meetings, and subsequently played a leading role in the Glasgow rent strike of 1915. T hough never formally associated with the WSF, Crawfurd seemed to revive its language of ‘social soviets’ and housewives’ as well as workers’ and soldiers’ councils. Claiming that ‘a housewife had not the fear of getting the sack, as the men had’, and that ‘far better rebels would be made out of the women than out of some of the men’, she directly invoked the precedent of wartime Glasgow and was generally to the fore in contesting women’s ancillary status within the CPGB. Another variant of the same approach, perhaps deriving from accounts of women’s role in the fall of Tsarism, was the suggestion of housewives’ factory groups by Andrew Rothstein, the Russians’ London press officer. ‘The home is the working housewife’s “workshop”, and the street is her “factory”’, Rothstein wrote in 1924. ‘Those who know the collective spirit that runs through the housewives in any working-class street...will see this.’

Another strand within the early CPGB was that of a small group of socialist birth-controllers influenced by the eugenicist preoccupations of the Edwardian period. Betraying traces of an aseptic elitism as well as feminism, on both scores they met with little response among the male industrial activists leading the CPGB. Stella Browne, who advocated selective birth control to ‘produce and build up a race fitted to carry out Communist and Feminist ideals’, was quickly disaffected when the party showed no interest in such a project. Cedar Paul had possibly a broader commitment to socialist politics. A former ILP and WSF member, whom Beatrice Webb described as ‘a clever linguist friend of Rosa Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin’, she had served for two years as British secretary to the Women’s International Council of Socialist and Labour Organisations and with her husband Eden Paul was a proselytiser for eugenics, workers’ education and the revolutionary elitism which the couple found expounded in H.G. Wells’s Modern Utopia.

[With the means of birth control placed at their disposal, modern intelligent women are not likely to accept the drawbacks of child-bearing unless they will not be compelled for innumerable years to spend most of their time in housework and in badly performed educational duties which ought to be communally performed by experts, Paul wrote with Fabian hauteur in 1922. Consequently, unless men and women are wise enough to establish a communist society, the intelligent modern woman will ‘birth control’ the race out of existence, or will ‘birth-control’ it back to a pre-human level of mentality (because only half-idiotic women will consent to become mothers). Full communism will be forced upon the race—unless we prefer the alternative of race suicide.

Favouring it with expert direction, for a period in the 1920s the Pauls ran a communist children’s section in St Pancras. Prolific translators of European literature and continuing supporters of the USSR, they appear by the end of the 1920s to have faded away from the political scene. More damaging than the loss of such politically peripheral figures were the expulsion of Pankhurst, the sidelining of Crawfurd and the temporary departure of Dora Montefiore for Australia, all by 1924. Pankhurst, the youngest of the three, was by this time over forty, and few among the ablest younger women communists had the same disposition to challenge the CPGB’s prevailing constructions of gender, as opposed to negotiating their own positions within them. The result was the CPGB’s domination by what is now a familiar roll-call of largely skilled male workers, many of them veterans of the wartime shop stewards’ movement. Automatically, they thought in terms of a sort of ‘Triple Alliance’ conception of politics, in which the male industrial battalions enjoyed an innate precedence and women seemed ‘the weakest link in the chain’. In 1920 the printworker Tom Quelch and engineer William McLaine thus felt able to dismiss the WSF as ‘a small group composed mainly of women’, while Salme Dutt on her arrival in Britain confirmed that ‘the WSF being a woman’s party does not command much respect from men’.

Though in relation to Pankhurst personal and political rivalries were...
as important as her sex, an indifference or hostility to feminist agendas was barely dissimulated in this early period. In London in 1927, aggregate meetings of women were discontinued as tending to create ‘an attitude among comrades contrary to that which the Party aimed at’. At the CPGB’s tenth congress two years later, national women’s organiser Beth Turner commented on the resistance of members to allowing any activities ‘that might be deemed to be feminism or encouragement to women to think on feminist lines’. In the same session, the London schoolteacher Kath Duncan attributed the failure to retain women members to attitudes of ‘sectarianism’, evidently signifying separation: ‘They are afraid to discuss women’s problems as women’s problems in case we should find ourselves in the Social Democratic position where women are concerned.’ Appropriately, Duncan cited as examples of a more positive attitude those districts where the CPGB’s activities were built upon disaffiliated Labour Party’s women sections.

Only Pollitt and possibly MacManus of the party’s emerging cohort of leaders had much record of having taken a different attitude—perhaps in reflection of their regional backgrounds. MacManus’s Glasgow, as we have seen, had witnessed the most dramatic of the period’s rent strikes, largely organised and conducted by the womenfolk, and it is possible that these perceptions were reinforced by MacManus’s contact with the Wheeldon circle in Derby. More certainly, women in Pollitt’s native Lancashire played an active role in the workplace and the articulation of a politics of gender almost without parallel in industrial Britain. For Pollitt himself, these roles were personified in the shape of his mother, whom he described in his memoirs as his confidante and initiator into the world of ideas. That may help explain why Pollitt was drawn to the WSF on moving to London and spoke on occasion from otherwise all-women platforms. Among the succession of political women to whom he acknowledged his further debt—others were Salme Dutt and Dona Torr—Pankhurst and her collaborator Melvina Walker were remembered in the warmest terms. Presumably it was on this basis that in 1924 Pollitt was charged with organising the CPGB’s first national women’s conference, and at this time commended both the Labour Party women’s sections and the prominence and enthusiasm of women in the KPD. On a speaking tour of South Wales a decade later, he made a special point of addressing himself to the miners’ wives, in defiance of the ‘back to the middle ages attitude’ of the local menfolk. ‘They won’t lift a teapot off the hob to pour themselves out a cup of tea’, he wrote privately. ‘The women are almost chattel slaves to the men, yet they are fine types who can be of great assistance to the Party.’

Despite such distinctions, Pollitt also subscribed to the Triple Alliance approach and was not so much drawn towards feminism as impatient with the sectarianism of the cadre party. In the resolution drafted for the 1924 women’s conference, the case put for the organisation of women was that ‘the attitude of the worker’s wife, mother, or sister will be the determining factor which will stiffen or undermine his resistance during a strike—or civil war’. Similarly, speaking at the 1935 party congress after returning from South Wales, Pollitt’s concern about ‘wife deserters’ was that the men themselves needed to be ‘loyally backed up by their women folk’. Though insisting that they be encouraged to join the party, the prospect he held out to women members thus remained a more limited and ‘familialist’ one, of ‘speaking about this work to the women they met in the shops and in the streets’, and supporting their husbands’ campaigns in the co-operative guilds.

His succession by the Yorkshire textile worker Beth Turner as the party’s first real women’s organiser signalled no fundamental change of approach. ‘To the woman at home comes the opportunity of proving herself the real helpmate of the man she has married’, she wrote, just as Pollitt might have.

In strikes and lockouts she will be put to the test. A weeping complaining woman will drive her husband back in despair to accept any terms that the capitalist cares to offer. But the woman who realises…that the enemy is looking on, counting on her weakness, waiting for the moment when she will betray the cause…that woman will rather die than let a whimper pass her lips, and she will be to her husband a constant source of strength and courage.

Such a conception was fleshed out during the 1926 miners’ lockout, when thriving women’s sections were set up in the hitherto male-dominated coal districts. According to the (male) communist in charge of the Fife women’s section, they even proved the party’s best recruits, and a few went on to be prominent party activists. Nevertheless, we have already seen how little long-term impact free-for-all recruitment had in districts like South Wales, and for most male communists the supporting role expected of their womenfolk remained at odds with their conception of a militant party elite. Apologising for her lack of ‘the market place voice’, a Derby congress delegate in 1929 complained that women entering the party were regarded merely as ‘very good tea-party fairies’. In reality, however, the performance of such functions was not regarded by most.
communists as an adequate basis for party membership.

The idea of the comrade was again a defining one, though in ways suggesting exclusions that were not merely political. In the WSF minutes one can trace the exact date—14 May 1920—when the appellations M rs and M iss were crossed out and ‘comrade’, without discrimination of sex, overwritten instead. By contrast, even Turner and Crawfurd sometimes respected the convention by which ‘comrade’ meant a man, so that even the redoubtable Isabel Brown can be found in reports as M rs Brown or even M rs E. (for Ernest) Brown.10 More importantly, though few men questioned Brown’s credentials—indeed ‘the M otherwell comrades’ insisted upon her parliamentary candidate—they were far less likely to regard as possible comrades their own wives and sisters.83 ‘Curiously enough they are anxious for all women (except their wives) to join the M ovem ent’, commented a foundation member who spent four years as the only woman communist in Newcastle before getting ‘M rs E. Brown of Shipley’ to address a women’s meeting: ‘[to] show that better comradeship between man and wife would prevail if both saw the grand possibilities of our M ovem ent.’82

But not all men were interested in comradeship between the sexes. Some actively opposed their wives joining the party, although at least in the post-war period they faced possible censure for adopting such an attitude.83 In the earlier period, one finds several cases of male members’ wives who were sympathetic to the party, and perhaps undertook tasks like selling the D aily W orker, but at least until the late 1930s did not necessarily join the party itself. In 1938, for example, Irene Paynter described the case of an all-male South Wales party branch where women ‘assisted in practically all branch activities, but…refused to join up, the main reason being they would feel out of place in the branch meeting’.84

In cases like this, ‘familialism’ was less a retreat than a recognition of contributions hitherto denied any formal status. Doris Coleman, the wife of an executive member of the Vehicle Builders’ union, explained how she came to join the party some ten years after her husband:

mainly that I had become conversant with the policy and ideals of the party through my husband and his comrades, and particularly because of the terrific impression one comrade made upon me…through her wonderful personality,…I never thought of joining the party, however—and probably wouldn’t have done so until this day if I hadn’t been asked by the wife of the then Derby branch secretary. M y husband…never asked me to join…

Initially inactive even within the party, she became more involved only when her branch ‘acquired a woman secretary who took the first steps to make me become more active’.85 Similarly, Ellen Gadsby in Vauxhall shared in her husband’s political activities and no doubt played the greater part in bringing up their children as communists. Nevertheless she was the last of the family to join the party herself.86

Sibling variations can again help to isolate factors making for different patterns of political commitment. A carpenter by trade, an active member of the SDF and a founding member of the Walthamstow and C oventry trades councils, T homas Pendred Jackson involved his children in his political activities, but with slightly different consequences according to the case. O ne of his sons, Frank Jackson, not only followed his father into his trade, but was inducted by him into membership of the SDF for his fifteenth birthday present. Another, Leonard, followed a similar path, and like Frank joined the CPGB on its foundation in 1920. T heir younger sister A nnie, born in 1897, also recalled growing up ‘with Socialist ideas and in a Socialist atmosphere’ and she too was ‘involved in the movement’ at an early age. She did not, however, follow her brothers into the CPGB until the 1940s, and was there described as devoting her main energy and talents to the D aily W orker bazaar. Q uite apart from her delayed adhesion to the party, we shall see that women’s responsibility for such activities was one of the ways in which a highly gendered style of politics was maintained within the communist party itself.87

The party questionnaires of I vor and H ell M ontagu provide another illuminating comparison. At once the most plutocratic and least self-conscious of British communists, I vor M ontagu confessed in his memoirs to not having attended to any domestic matter until attending a Y CL summer school at the age of nearly thirty. Joining the CPGB in 1931, he made a politically compatible match with H ell M ontagu, a stenographer in the film industry who helped organise delegations to the U SSR and was especially interested in its attitudes to child welfare and maternity care. H ow far the fact of her not yet joining the communist party reflected her husband’s total domestic dependence upon her—‘bringing her tea in bed every morning is possibly the chore that pays for all’, he commented cheerfully—must remain conjectural. N evertheless, H ell did eventually join the party in 1939 and three years later they both filled out a party questionnaire. I vor, asked about his recreations, wrote ‘principally lawn tennis and table tennis’; H ell, ‘no time but know about them’. I vor, on whether he carried out private study, responded: ‘yes’; his wife: ‘very little—no time and tired after work’. I vor, asked about his own ‘best contributions’ to the party’s work, answered: ‘Reichstag Fire Trial work,
Ebullient and impervious to self-parody, Ivor Montagu tells us as much about the British upper class as about communism. Nevertheless, echoes of such a relationship can be detected in the most disparate social contexts. Sam Russell’s wife was a health visitor, formerly a nurse in Spain, and when he was offered a job as the Daily Worker’s Moscow correspondent, it meant the end of her career. ‘I just ignored it’, he recalled with great honesty. ‘You can be a communist and maybe you think you take an enlightened attitude... In fact we were as benighted as the rest, in fact more so.’89 Alec and Jean Ferguson were veteran activists, originally from the Scottish coalfields, and when Alec went to Spain, it was Jean, who then had a young daughter, who took over from him the responsibility for his weekly Daily Worker sale of some twenty-six quire. Nevertheless, she too remained outside of the party, then and subsequently. ‘He joined it, I didn’t bother about parties’, she recalled in a joint interview.

You see, if you can’t give up everything, it’s no good being in the Communist Party, is it? He puts the Communist Party in front of the family and in front of me. (Alec: Not completely.) Completely, because when you went to Spain you says to me, ‘It’s the only thing I’d put in front of you and our Sonia’. The party was first and you came second. If there was money in his pocket, and if he’s none he makes me go and get five or ten pound, and hand it to them when they come. It’s been like that at our house. (It’s been like that at our house because you’ve got the money.)90

Arguing like comrades on equal terms, Jean Ferguson had her own sphere of activity in the co-operative movement and was anything but self-effacing within it. Even so, women coming second was in this period the foundation on which the party operated, and one of the keys to the proverbial influence it exercised ‘out of all proportion to its numbers’.

Women as ‘cadres’

The same characteristics were reflected at leadership level. It was true of every European communist party that women did not hold even such positions within the party hierarchy commensurate with their minority status. Crudely speaking, the greater the authority of a post or committee, the less likely one was to find a woman filling it; and the more we find women holding a particular position, the lower we must assume the priority attached to it. Aiming as it did to represent the different elements within the party, the party executive did invariably include a small presence of women—rising from about a tenth to a seventh of its members during the 1940s—and a similar proportion of the party’s parliamentary candidates were also women.91 Maggie Jordan, a substitute member of the YCL executive in the mid-1920s, suggested in her autobiography that ‘the fact that I was a girl and a textile worker was taken into consideration more than my political activities’.92 Reflecting Comintern pressure, Crawford and Turner even enjoyed year-long stints on the party’s political bureau, Turner in a consultative capacity. There was to be no further female representation on this, the party’s highest body, until 1952.

In the key post of district organiser, a similar position obtained. The earliest woman full-timer appears to have been Maggie Clarke, a militant teacher and future NUT executive member who briefly in the mid-1920s was area organiser in Birmingham. There were also at least two cases, in which male organisers were assisted by no less able or committed partners in the shape of Isabel Brown, and Lily Ferguson, formerly Webb. Indeed, Ferguson, a cotton worker and unemployed activist from Ashton-under-Lyne, recalled that it was ‘generally recognised’ that she would share her husband’s responsibilities: ‘the Party secured not one but two full-time workers’.93 It was not however until 1937 that on her return from the Lenin School the party appointed Marion Jessop as its first woman district organiser, in the West Riding. Again this may indirectly be attributed to the Comintern, through its insistence that women be represented in each ILS intake. Thus, Maggie Jordan attended the school in 1927, ‘although again... of the opinion that my sex and age was taken more into consideration than it should have been’. On her return in 1930, she was nominated women’s organiser in the Bradford district, as Ferguson and Bessie Dickenson were for Manchester and North East Lancashire respectively.94 Though encouraged by the Comintern, this was also a recognition of women’s relative political prominence in the textile districts. In earlier years, ILP branches in the West Riding were reputedly more welcoming to women than elsewhere, and although the CPGB did not immediately carry on this tradition—in 1927 the Bradford district had the lowest proportion of women members next to Tyneside—its persistence is discernible in the periods spent as national women’s organiser of Turner (1924–9) and of Brown (1939–42).95 By 1942 the CPGB’s West Yorkshire district—which excluded the coal and engineering belt round Sheffield—boasted a woman district organiser and district membership...
organiser, a woman as its largest city organiser, in Leeds, and a woman secretary of its most important engineering branch. Generally, the war years witnessed women’s increasing prominence in the party apparatus, and in 1942 Betty Matthews was appointed the second of the party’s women district organisers in the new South East Midlands district. Rhodesian-born and a product of the 1930s’ student movement, Matthews went on to fill a number of secondary positions at national level. It is telling that as late as 1983 a successor of hers in the South East Midlands could still be described as the party’s only full-time woman district secretary.

The obstacles were greatest for women from working-class backgrounds. Except during the class-based affirmative action of the Third Period, leading women party members were far more likely than their male counterparts to have middle-class or professional backgrounds. Helen Crawfurd noted that in the early years the party’s few women members were mostly ‘intellectuals’, and these enjoyed not just the time, resources and mobility to give to party work but possibly a greater self-assurance as to the skills they brought to it. Several were associated with the Labour Research Department, whose Fabian origins provided a direct link with traditions of middle-class voluntary work. On the CPGB national women’s committee established in 1922, four of the six members—Dilys Budden, Mary Moorhouse, Lydia Packman and Salme Dutt—were part of the middle-class Bolshevik ‘nucleus’ centred on the LRD. In St Pancras, where Budden, Packman and many other party intellectuals lived, over a third of the party’s membership (forty out of 110) were women: a figure significantly in excess of that obtaining elsewhere. Traditions of voluntary work were not exclusive to women, but long-term commitments remained more characteristic of women like Noreen Branson and Margaret Llewellyn Davies and Gertrude Tuckwell. Although by the 1940s women exercising significant party responsibilities felt accepted on more or less equal terms by their male colleagues, they were also aware of their exceptional status. The Daily Worker journalist Florence Kewy called them ‘honorary men’ and as an outsider, professional person, or simply invested with the party’s own authority, recalled her embarrassment at entering members’ homes and having the man talk with her while the woman kept in the background, ‘maybe dispensing tea, and then sitting quietly and respectfully in the corner’. As Coventry women’s organiser, Margaret Cohen had similar experiences.

You bet it was male-dominated, with a pretty backward attitude to their womenfolk too…not directed against me, but in what I thought was a deplorable attitude to their own wives.

For some women, industrial activism provided the same acceptance into a predominantly male world of comradeship. In the Sheffield engineering industry, Vi Gill recalled the considerable encouragement she received as ‘a lass in a sea of men’, while for Agnes Mclean in wartime Glasgow it was the communists’ support for women’s organisation that drew her into the party. Both, however, were single, and though generally male communists became more willing to countenance their wives’ membership of the party, within the home they continued to regard as their own prerogative the more active and disruptive responsibilities with which party membership itself had once been synonymous. In 1953 a Lancashire full-time official recorded that her husband seemed to be ‘waiting for me to make a mess either of the jobs with the Party or a failure of my job as a mother’. As her position was that of women’s organiser, it is unlikely that he thought the position itself unsuitable for a woman; but nor, as in many other cases, was a general acceptance of women’s political role necessarily extended to one’s own home.

For women who did succeed in taking on political responsibilities, these were often of a circumscribed character. Helen Crawfurd repeatedly complained in the 1920s of the restriction of the party’s ablest women to ‘technical work’, so that King Street’s press, propaganda and finance departments were all headed by women, but overtly political responsibilities were denied them. In 1924, Rose Cohen, one of several exceptional women connected with the LRD, was proposed as Tom Bell’s replacement political secretary to the CPGB’s colonial department. Conceivably this confirmed the party’s depreciation of both spheres of activity, for the colonial committee in this period was unique in its high representation of women communists, while conversely its male ‘industrial’ members like Percy Glading were
instructed to prioritise other spheres of work. Even so, the suggestion that a woman should actually direct colonial work was rapidly withdrawn after Gallacher reported there being some feeling that the position be given to ‘a man’. The same year Minnie Birch, who had joined the WSF as early as 1916, reported that she would not be able to function as a stenographer for the Young Communist International in view of her other responsibilities as a YCL executive member. Already Birch had been identified by Crawfurd as somebody who ought to be freed from technical work. Nevertheless, the party’s politbureau immediately resolved that ‘the Youth Executive was amply represented by comrades Rust, Springhall and Young, and that Minnie Birch’s services should be utilised for the technical work required’. Comrades Rust, Springhall and Young, needless to say, were men, and the last of them had previously complained of having to do the YCL’s administrative work himself, as ‘most of the girls are not young Communists but in the League for other reasons’.

Such circumscribed roles may partly explain the attraction which working in the Comintern apparatus exercised for women like Cohen. Paddy Ayris, the King Street stenographer sent to Moscow to avert a sexual scandal, reflected positively on her experiences in Russia and China, and has been linked by John Lucas with other young women of sexual scandal, reflected positively on her experiences in Russia and Paddy Ayris, the King Street stenographer sent to Moscow to avert a sexual scandal...

According to Roger Simon, who did take on the position, ‘they insisted I did [it] because they said it would be more difficult for a woman’, and through almost the whole of the party’s history there is no record of a woman being entrusted with a responsibility of this type. Ironically, Heinemann was actually better versed than Simon in the ‘masculine’ world of trade union contacts, having sat on the CPGB’s rails advisory committee and established contacts with both communist and non-communist mining union leaders. As well as acting as a sometime amanuensis for NUM president Will Lawther, she had books to her credit on Britain’s Coal and the Wages Front and was referred to by Pollitt as the ‘coal queen’. Ironcally, Simon’s predecessor as LRD secretary, Henry Parsons, had been able to perform such a role because of his wife’s inherited income, while she performed various ancillary activities including the chauffeuring about of Pollitt. Incidentally, she was another who described herself as joining the CPGB ‘a bit late’ in 1937, aged forty-five. ‘I did not join earlier because there were a lot of meetings and I had children to look after...’

If technical work was the bane of cadres, ‘supporters’ were lent on for social and fund-raising activities. Evidently justifying the ‘tea fairy’ remark, in 1928 a Central Women’s Committee was set up to ‘concentrate on the social side’ of the forthcoming election campaign, including ‘Socials, Whist Drives, Dances, and the running of a large bazaar and Sale of Work’. This division of labour was later institutionalised in the form of the Daily Worker bazaar, a fund-raising jamboree which became one of the focal points of the local party calendar. For months beforehand, groups of women gathered to make goods for the bazaars, and similar activities underwrote the party’s own organisation and the subsistence wages it paid its functionaries. Where once this might have been regarded as a purely ancillary role, now it provided a form of incorporation into the family party. Stan Martin described his wife as one of those who ‘wasn’t political at all’ but joined the party with him in 1956, and while never attending meetings or reading communist literature, ‘like a lot of wives at that time, she would make things for the Daily Worker bazaar’. At all levels women were five or six times as likely as men to be bazaar organisers, and for the committed communists among them the disparagement of such activities as ‘women’s work’ often rankled. It is telling that when in 1945 Pat Devine was shifted from the CPGB’s Lancashire district office to become the Worker’s national bazaar organiser, he had no doubt that this was intended as a slight and demotion.

At branch level, women for a time were actually over-represented among the party’s officers, but again tended to be saddled with ‘technical’ responsibilities. Branch directories from the 1920s show that fewer than one in ten of the party’s local organisers were women. By 1939, a partial list of London branch committees shows that women now
provided about a third of committee members and a majority of secondary branch officers, even if women’s organisers are excluded. However, the figure falls to just six of the twenty-one secretaries whose sex is known and only one of the eleven branch chairs. With the absorption of male activists into the war effort, women like M argaret Cohen stepped directly into their shoes, although afterwards there was again a reflux. Of the 1939 branch committee members, over half were at that time under thirty, and there must have been many like Cohen who after the war saw to the bringing up of young children. Similarly, at the Daily Worker, where for a time there were as many as ten women journalists, gradually the figure fell back to just one. On the other hand, the CPGB did from this time adopt a branch structure and campaigning style reminiscent in many ways of the ILP or BSP, not least in the disavowal of any effective control of the workplace activities preoccupying the party’s male industrial core. If women were now more likely to be advanced to leading branch positions, to some extent this therefore represented a redefinition and diminution of the authority attached to these positions, which was itself partly tied up with the issue of gender.

Already on the pre-war London list, the only branch committee members with national or regional-level experience were women, including Budden, Eva Reckitt, Hilda Vernon and two Left Book Club organisers, Jane Conway and Betty Reid. The roster at this time still included some industrial activists, like the Siemens convenor and Greenwich party secretary Charlie Wellard, but such combinations were to become ever less likely with the proliferation of ‘trade union communists’ after the war. Sometimes this directly represented the demarcations of the party family: Jean Styles, a mother of four and later the CPGB’s national women’s organiser, wrote of how it seemed ‘obvious’ that her husband ‘should make his main contribution through the trade union and labour movement, and that I should make mine through the local Party branch’. This was also accompanied by a subtle downgrading of the status of the branch. The ETU national secretary Frank Haxell, who was to be disgraced in the 1961 ballot-rigging trial, had himself been a London branch secretary in the 1930s or early 1940s. By the 1950s, however, the very last place one would have found him was fixing the raffle at the Daily Worker bazaar, and his branch membership secretary Laurie Green recalled ‘the contempt that some of these comrades engaged in power struggles in industry had for the local communist party branch, putting up petty little candidates in local elections, like my wife Jean’.

It is symptomatic that whereas women were very marginally more likely to hold residential branch positions after the war, they were systematically under-represented in factory groups or branches. Moreover, of the tiny number of women holding such positions, the majority date from the war years. An exception to the rule was Joyce Browne, an engineering shop steward and member of the party’s London district committee, but even she recalled how initially her factory comrades ‘could not stomach the idea that a woman should be their Group Secretary’. Only from the late 1960s did the resurgence of women’s industrial activities have some reflection in trade union structures, and in the national and district committees of the party itself. For its factory branches, by this time in irreversible decline, it was already too late.

‘Women’s work?’

One area in which women secured more prominent roles was that elastically defined as ‘women’s work’. Florence Keyworth recalled that communist women were expected to regard themselves as ‘relative creatures’—‘wives and mothers, concerned about peace, nurseries, rents and prices for the sake of their families’—and from the mid-1930s this approach was institutionalised in bodies like the Women’s Campaign against War and Fascism and the post-war National Assembly of Women. Providing a voice for them was the Daily Worker’s weekly women’s page and the monthly Woman Today, initially conceived as a forum ‘for all progressive women’ and continuing into the 1950s as a leftish women’s magazine in a ‘popular’ format. Subliminally, recipes and ‘M other-craft’ features underlined the gendered character of its political demands, and even stereotype-defying activities like involvement in the hunger marches could be remembered in ‘relative’ terms, as a ‘demonstration of solidarity with the men’ rather than women’s rights as workers. Such attitudes were most characteristic of areas of heavy male industrial employment, and on Tyneside almost the first action of a party-dominated housewives’ group in 1940 was to write to the trades council pledging ‘the determination of the women to assist the trade unionists in the fight for higher wages’.

In addition to avowedly women’s activities, women were also more likely to be involved in peace or welfare-orientated organisations. In the early 1920s, this was true of the Workers’ International Relief (WIR), whose origins lay in the campaign for Russian famine relief and which among other things raised funds for Russian orphans’ homes. In addition to Crawford as its secretary, the WIR uniquely had an executive comprising more women than men, reflecting the philanthropic and welfare roles through which women had been entering public affairs over...
of the previous century. It is notable that in 1925 the WIR was urged by the CPGB to forgo trade union affiliations, as the minority movement’s pre-emptive, and focus instead on the co-operative organisations which themselves tended to be regarded as a sort of women’s sphere. Conversely, when the WIR was later revived on a more combative basis, not of children’s homes and clothing campaigns but strike relief functions in the coalfields, its was under the full-time secretarship of a man, Jack Leckie, who was sent back to Britain from Berlin for the purpose.

Women were also more likely to have been activists or officers in peace-related campaigns than most other organisations, perhaps suggesting a gendered context for Pollitt’s complaint that these issues were never made the responsibility of ‘the best comrades we have in the Party’. In Nottingham, the British Peace Committee was described as ‘almost completely isolated from the industrial workers and the trade union organisation’. In Manchester, Ruth Frow attributed the favourable response she received from trade unionists to her being married to the prominent local AEU activist Edmund Frow, almost as if she were an ‘adjunct’ to him. “Poor old Eddie can’t cope with the peace work as well as all the union work, so Ruth does it for him”, In Luton, a similar division of labour applied across a wide range of activities, from bus passes and to nursery schools and council-house rents. ‘There weren’t many of the women working in factories, and the men working in the factories had a completely different fight on their hands’, recalled one of those involved. ‘I can’t say the party did much; the party was much more involved with what the men were doing’.

Some women rejected such typecasting. In her broader survey of left-wing activists, Pamela Graves notes that communists provided an exception to the rule that women were generally more likely than men to see themselves as social reformers rather than political activists. T hough this was not universally the case, for some women one of the attractions of the CPGB was precisely that it was not organised along the gendered lines of the co-op guilds or Labour women’s sections, running as these often did to the rhythms of older married women. O ne who did find acceptance within the guilds even recalled that she was regarded as a ‘different sort of communist’, more respectable, less ‘belligerent’ and turned up at meetings with her little girl. K eyworth, on the other hand, admitted that women having achieved the status of ‘honorary men’ were ‘apt to despise, almost, the outlook of women and the role that was assigned to women’, symbolised as it was by the bazaar. ‘Even within the party, a lot of women, wives of party members, did a lot of bazaars and things and, you know, bazaars were not for us; we were political women.’

Sometimes the attitude was unconscious: a prominent activist in the 1920s could condemn the ‘supercilious attitude’ to women of many male communists, while in the same breath dismissing the then flourishing co-operative guilds as ‘usually mothers’ meetings’. O thers described their own involvement in women’s work in resigned terms. O ne, who joined the party through leading nurses’ campaigns, wrote stoically of her later aspirations: ‘Not in domestic position to consider these. Force of circumstances made me Women’s O rganiser’.

Particularly in the party’s earlier years, some recruits adopted a forthright masculine posture following Bolshevik precedents. Salme Dutt, formerly Pekkala, was a formidable example. Although a distinctly non-combatant veteran of the Finnish civil war, Salme comportted herself like a Bolshevichka and on arrival in Britain in 1920 gave a somewhat exaggerated impression of her role in the struggle against Tsarism. Launching herself into the training of ‘Red Officers’ and the unsentimental rigours of Bolshevik organisation, for the ‘nucleus’ of Bolshevisers discontented with the party’s older leaders, Salme was a veritable fount of authority. T he Balliol graduate Tom Wintringham once addressed her as their ‘governess’. Even Pollitt, no wilting violet, compared a meeting with her to being ‘placed against the wall and shot’. M uch later, when he broke ranks over the war, Salme taunted him for his ‘womanly’ aversion to party discipline and the admirers he would find among ‘all the young ladies in the Party’. Rumoured to be an NKVD agent, Salme wrote sub-Brechtian poems like Stronger than Stal which Pollitt assured her he preferred to Gallacher’s sub-Burnsian ‘doggerel’. Evidently a bashing by the Clydesider held fewer terrors than a shooting by Salme.

For reasons involving health problems and conspiracy in a combination yet to be elucidated, Salme never acquired any real public standing in the CPGB after returning to Britain with Dutt in 1936. In any case, her insinuations concerning Pollitt’s ‘young ladies’ and ‘Popular Pals’ were by this time a little anachronistic. Instead, the Popular Front saw the emergence of what Bruley has aptly called ‘feminist cadres’ who ‘wanted their political work to reflect their identity as women rather than to detract from it as previous women cadres had sought to do’. Viewed from the party outwards, this represented a shift towards work with broader women’s organisations, signalled by the reintroduction of women’s groups at the 1937 party congress. Prosopographically, it also represented the attraction to the party of women, often from liberal, professional or reformist socialist backgrounds and drawn by the general progressive ambience of the popular front and the opportunities it offered for a more feminised conception of politics. Clearly, at the
personal level these did not so much adopt the new approach on Moscow's orders as bring it into the party with them.

That can be traced over time. As the archetypal feminist cadre, Bruley cites Nan M acmillan, a London schoolteacher who had joined the party in 1929 and preferred the National Union of Women Teachers to the NUT because of its stance on equal pay and local authority bans on the employment of married women. Nevertheless, her party autobiography strongly emphasises the importance she attached to union and party responsibilities, as if her involvement in more feminist-orientated campaigns was a secondary or tactical consideration. Indeed, her role as chair of the wartime London Women's Parliament, perhaps the most impressive of these campaigns, is not mentioned at all.147 In this respect, M acmillan's basically 'party' trajectory may be differentiated from that of another of Bruley's feminist cadres, Hilda Vernon, who effectively took responsibility for this aspect of the party's work in the late 1930s. The daughter of a German socialist translator, Vernon had initially been active in the ILP, joining the CPGB in 1935 having been greatly impressed by the all-women sessions of the World Congress of Women Against War and Fascism the previous year.148 In an understated way, she came to the party committed to changing it as well working through it, insisting that women's groups were required merely not for the convenience of wives and mothers, but to bring the whole party to a better understanding of women's position in society: 'it is probable that in no sphere are we so backward as in this, and have so many non-Marxist illusions to overcome'.149 While her brother Tom Vernon remained a fellow-travelling Labour activist, successively leader of the Labour groups on M arylebone and D eal district councils, Hilda remained a communist until her death.

Vernon was four years older than M acmillan; crucially she joined the CPGB six years after her. Among her fellow converts from the ILP were other 'delayed' adherents whose membership was facilitated by or conditional upon the transformations of party policy and culture then being undertaken. Possibly this was particularly the case with women. H ettie Bower was another 1920s' ILP recruit, friendly with communists, but as 'a very conventional “socialist”' dropping her involvement with the Hackney People's Players when it turned towards 'agit-prop' and 'street corner goings-on'. She too joined the CPGB in 1935.150 N ell Vyse joined perhaps a year or so earlier, already in her forties and with half a lifetime's experience of politics behind her. Active with her mother in the W SPU, she had joined the ILP during the First World War and was a founder of the Labour Party in Rye. Through two male contacts she even tried to join the CPGB at this time, but 'they did not think I was advanced enough'. M oving back to Chelsea, where with her husband she founded the Pottery Workers' Guild, she broke with the Labour Party over Mondism and in the early 1930s began taking the D aily Worker. However, she too did not actually join the CPGB until the mid-1930s after she became involved with the Peace Ballot. Initially active on tenants' issues and Spanish Aid, during the war she became a 'full-time unpaid' borough organiser in Watford and then, upon the call-up of her male predecessor, borough secretary in Southwark. In between, she assisted the London Women's Parliament with a dependants' pensions conference—exactly as during the First World War she had worked with the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families' Association. When after the war she made way as borough secretary for a returning serviceman, she admitted finding 'great difficulty in adjusting to being Branch Secretary'. Subsequently spending a year as the D aily Worker's Central Bazaar organiser, hers was in many ways the archetypal life history of one of the CPGB's feminist cadres.151

Briefly during the war she also appears to have worked as a factory nurse: another typical experience, for many 'feminist cadres' were also relative creatures by profession or vocation.152 Regardless of which came first, political allegiances and professional commitments were often complementary expressions of the same ameliorative impulses: thus, while many communists were attracted into the expanding teaching profession in the hope of doing something 'useful' within the emerging social settlement of the 1940s, medical workers found in the communism of the popular front period a politicisation of the impulses which first took them into the health services. T his was true of three of the four female health workers interviewed for the M anchester project, for whom possible political catalysts included Spanish M edical Aid and the attempt to set up a democratic nurses' union.153 E ven as a child June Bean was set on becoming a doctor and overcome barriers of gender and social class to do so—another example of possible convergences between occupational mobility and political radicalism. A nni R adford, who joined the party as an A rchitectural A ssociation student, provides a different sort of lineage, for her grandfather had been a founder of the Fabian Arts Group and collaborator with Bernard Shaw in fundraising entertainments on behalf of the matchgirls' strike, while her grandmother was an associate of Eleanor Marx. H er husband described her adhesion to the CPGB 'not so much [as] a matter of joining "the Party" as an attitude towards society that she had absorbed and for which, like her parents, she found expression in public service'.154

In relation to the typology of 'cadres' and 'supporters', 'relative'
activists sit a little uncomfortably. Though they engaged with issues of social reform very much of their own volition, in several cases the further step of joining the communist party is attributed to personal influences. In some cases, like Bean or Avis Hutt, this was a boyfriend or future husband. For Margaret Kettle, a student activist who first encountered communists through the League of Nations Union, the influence was more diffuse but equally one of personal example: ‘just that these people were good people and that I wanted to be part of that’. M argaret Cohen, an Oxford contemporary moved to join by Spain and the experience of helping at holiday camps for the unemployed, was attracted to communists in the same basically ‘emotional’ way as ‘the most active fighters for socialism’. ‘I don’t recollect that when I joined the communist party I was desperate to find out more about its ideas’, she too recollected. ‘I was influenced more by people than by ideas.’

There is an obvious analogy with the trade union recruits who similarly were often influenced by personal factors, whether individual or collective, rather than what Croucher calls the ‘overtly political’ aspects of party work. Moreover, if many ‘trade union communists’ retained their basic preoccupation with industrial questions once the urgency of the anti-fascist years had abated, feminist cadres gave sign of a similar withdrawal from party politics into what might, by analogy with ‘economism’, be described as ‘welfarism’. Cohen was a teacher by profession who regarded herself primarily as an ‘activist’ on issues like peace and housing. By the 1960s, she had all but abandoned contact with party-sponsored bodies like the National Assembly of Women, preferring to work in broader networks like the National Campaign for Nursery Education, with its Fabian-permeated mixture of Liberal, Church-based and even Conservative support. Avis Hutt, a nationally prominent activist in the communist-sponsored peace campaigns of the 1950s, also dropped out of party work when these faded away after 1960 and described herself primarily as ‘a campaigner’. Yvonne Kapp, a successful littérateur who joined the communist party I was desperate to find out more about its ideas’, she too recollected. ‘I really wasn’t very much of a political person except knowing which side I was on…. I suppose what counted most for me was the idea of social inequality.’ Joining the Labour Party after the CPGB’s dissolution, she left again over the threat to charge NHS patients to see a doctor.

**Politics, marriage and the family**

In Gorki’s novel *Mother* we saw that the view was expressed that the revolutionary should never marry. For some at least of the party’s founding generation, readers perhaps of *Martin Eden* and *Mr Polly* rather than Gorki, this disparagement of domesticity was deeply embedded. Tom Bell, for example, was a thorough revolutionary: a Scottish ironmoulder of saturnine countenance, who in 1941 published a book of ‘party’ memoirs of surprising frankness and individuality. Along with drink and ‘Possibilism’, among the snares he recalled as threatening the movement’s bright young men was matrimony. ‘To me, marriage and the family was a bourgeois trap’, he remembered candidly.

It was of a piece with the entire policy of the ruling class to keep the workers under its rule. From infancy the child of the worker is soaked with rules of behaviour ostensibly to make him a good citizen, an upright parent and a pillar of society…. this was the acme of deception. Once married, with children, the ups and downs of unemployment, low wages, sickness and debts, there was no escape.

‘The worker’, he concluded gloomily, ‘was entirely at the mercy of the bourgeois class for the remainder of his life, doomed to provide children for exploitation and war’.

The whimsicality of the youngster’s ideal, of ‘a bachelor life devoted to the workers’ movement’, may be inferred from the fact that so very few male communists adopted it. Only the Connolly Association’s Desmond Greaves is recorded as taking a ‘conscious decision’ to put political duty...
before marriage prospects, and this would have been more impressive had he not been nearly forty at the time. Eric Hobsbawm does remark on how the seemingly ‘monastic existence’ of James Klugmann increased the respect in which he was held by other communists—but it also underlines its exceptionality. Bell, in any case, married not once but twice. He met his second wife in Moscow when she was working at the Comintern in the late 1920s, and she later returned there with Bell when he took over as head of the English sector of the Lenin School. In between, she provided anything but a trap. ‘Com. Bell is fully occupied with political work—writing, speaking, etc’, she wrote to a Moscow contact in 1932. ‘I am very glad to be able to support our home, so that he may be free to devote all his time to it.’

Far from the revolutionary never getting married, marriage was the division of labour on which most male activism depended. Consequently, it was not men but married women who, whatever the level or type of activity, faced the greater challenge in negotiating space to pursue it. For many of them, responsibilities assumed within the home were what defined them as relative creatures, and the attraction of ‘women’s work’ or the co-op guilds was not just the greater variety of roles they provided, but the arrangement of commitments to accommodate women otherwise unprovided for. Similarly, involvement in youth and children’s organisations could reflect the practical consideration that these were activities in which one’s own family could be involved without a clash of responsibilities. T hough ‘ordinary’, mixed-sex party activities were not normally adapted to such forms of participation, a number of post-war suburban branches did arrange meetings to take place in the homes of women with children. At every level, from the executive to the local branch, one also finds husband-and-wife teams co-ordinating political activities, and occasionally the ideal case of a ‘party husband’ balancing political work with childcare commitments. Golda Barr, whose husband was of this type, admitted reproaching other members ‘that once they got married, and once they got a child, you didn’t see the women at a branch meeting any more’, which does again suggest exceptionality: ‘I think that I was the only one with children…’ Moreover, even in these circumstances, roles within the branch were circumscribed, and Barr was mainly responsible for fundraising and the bazaar. In the pre-war Wythenshawe branch, comprising mainly young couples, the women’s section met on a separate evening, not the afternoon, while the men took their turn with the children. Nevertheless, the women’s meetings still featured the making of bazaar items, and were said to be less ‘political’ than general branch meetings. Cases like that of Marie Betteridge, a prominent community activist who was supported in her work by her husband, a sometime full-time party functionary, must have been much rarer.

For longer or shorter periods, many women communists adopted a less active political role on grounds of prioritising commitments to their children. Sometimes this was expressed in terms of the functioning ‘party family’, in which the husband’s continuing activism was complemented by the ‘creation of a happy and secure home life’ for the party children. Rose Kerrigan, who otherwise had all the attributes of a natural rebel, was unusual in the frankness with which she described this as a form of obligation to her husband, and through him to the party itself. Born in Dublin to Russian-born Jewish parents in 1903, she moved with her family to Glasgow as a child and was introduced to socialism by her father, reading to him as he worked at home on tailoring jobs. Accompanying him to meetings, she also attended the local Socialist Sunday School before working for a time at the Socialist Labour Press, helping in the bookshop and attending classes of John Maclean at the Scottish Labour College. Still in her mid-teens, she even figures in Gallacher’s Revolt on the Clyde, enduring the stewards’ attentions at a pro-war public meeting. N or was she hidebound in sexual matters. Defying her mother by marrying outside her religion, she disregarded convention as a ‘pioneer birth controller’ who put off having children until her thirties: ‘I went to the birth control clinic, and they looked at me aghast—nobody was served there except for they’d already had four or six children…. As the only girl in the family, she had been ‘much put upon’ to do the chores during her mother’s frequent illnesses, and socialism in part may have provided a sense of release. ‘I felt women were discriminated against and grew up feeling men were the lucky sex’, she recalled, though she was notably more indulgent towards her father’s memory than her mother’s.

Despite such an upbringing, Rose played almost no public political role after the birth of her first child in 1932. We have seen that her husband Peter was one of the CPGB’s foremost cadres of the inter-war years and Rose supported him in all his activities, whether accompanying him to Moscow as CPGB representative or staying at home to receive his parcels of dirty washing from the hunger marches. ‘I took upon myself the feeling that as a backroom girl, making sure that my Peter didn’t have the worries of the home… I was doing my party work’ she recalled in a later interview.

I felt that he was doing his job, and in order to make sure that he
could do the job and not be lumbered with a lot of personal things at home, and not neglect our children... then it was my place to see to that...

Here it seems that either memory or discretion suppressed an earlier feeling of frustration in such a role and the dream of having 'more time for the Party' once her family's demands upon were relaxed. 'All the years I have been in the Party I have given all the time I could', she wrote in her party autobiography in 1951, and it is true that before having children she had set up a branch of the breakaway United Clothing Workers' Union and played a part in the Glasgow unemployed movement.\textsuperscript{177} She had also worked for the Prudential during the war and got involved with what her husband called its 'bloody staff union'. 'I regret', she added in the autobiography, 'that because of family reasons (3 children, and a husband whose whole time is taken up by the Party) I cannot give as much as time as I have done when I was younger & more free'.\textsuperscript{178}

There must have been many relationships similar to this, though generally they have to be reconstructed from more fragmentary evidence. For Wal H anninton, a fellow engineer and near contemporary of Kerrigan's, we have only an allusion to his travails as 'head cook and bottle-washer' when his wife broke her arm. 'To crown it, I get no loving sympathy from her, all she says is “well, all your life you’ve had to wait on you and you wondered what the hell I did with my time, so now you know!”'\textsuperscript{179} Don Renton, like Kerrigan, was a Scotsman whose experiences took in Spain, the NUWM and post-war responsibilities as a party functionary. Dependent on a wider division of labour, his DLB entry records that 'his wife was the main breadwinner of the family, with his mother and sisters...looking after the daughter'. Only when he left the party in 1956, did Renton himself return to conventional paid employment.\textsuperscript{180}

Part of the problem was the cult of leadership. Annie Cree was a former Sheffield SDer and CPGB central committee member, who in the 1930s moved to the London area and commented on how the party's 'newer and enthusiastic men comrades' pursued political activities almost nightly, so that 'the wife, although mildly interested, feels she can be no use, she cannot talk politics and anyway there's the children to look after and put to bed and father is never home, so why worry?' Turning conventional thinking on its head, Cree proposed as 'a Party task and true equality' that the man spend one night at home, seeing to the children and domestic chores while the women did their bit for the party.\textsuperscript{181} This might have been more practicable had not leaders like Kerrigan attempted to generalise impossible levels of activity on the basis of their own unpublishised domestic circumstances. When after the war the secretary of one of the party's industrial advisories sought to resign his position, partly because his wife was expecting a baby, it was Kerrigan who objected through lack of any alternative.\textsuperscript{182} More explicitly, an overloaded veteran wishing to drop his activities for the International Brigade Association was again opposed by Kerrigan: 'If it is possible for me, as the National Organiser, with a Parliamentary campaign on my hands as well, to be active in the IB, we have every right to expect it from any other comrade who is an ex-IBer...'.\textsuperscript{183}

It is hardly surprising that the handful of communists said to have avoided marriage for reasons of career or independence were mostly women. The most famous example is Ellen Wilkinson, who as an ex-communist Labour MP touched on these dilemmas in her 1920s novel Clash. Hilda Vernon is also said to have taken the decision not to marry for undisclosed ‘political’ reasons, while one of our project interviewees described how the memory of her parents' unemployment in the 1930s instilled in her a similar desire for personal independence.\textsuperscript{184} Agnes M aclean and Vi Gill, as we have seen, were active in industry. M clean was a Glasgow engineering worker who sat on both the CPGB and AEU national executives and later became a Labour councillor. 'Your role as a female was to find a man and security, and then you were expected to give up work to start a family and keep the home', she recalled bluntly. 'I didn’t want any of that.'\textsuperscript{185} Gill was another engineering cadre who in 1974 became only the second since the 1930s to sit on the party's political committee. She too never married, though five years later she retired from these responsibilities on having a child.\textsuperscript{186}

Marital break-up could also help create the space for political commitments. Sometimes this was its attraction, and having separated from her husband in 1930 Rose Smith was another of the select band elevated to what was then the political bureau.\textsuperscript{187} For women in more comfortable circumstances, a partner's death could also provide such opportunities, as was the case of two of the CPGB’s earliest women executive members, the former suffragists D ora M ontefiore and H elen C rawford. Born in 1851, M ontefiore was drawn into politics after her husband’s death in 1889 and the discovery that she had no rights of custody over her own children. Whatever the initial motivation, it is difficult to imagine her subsequent life of activism, spanning four continents, being undertaken so readily had her husband lived.\textsuperscript{188} C harlotte D espard, a contemporary of M ontefiore's whose husband died in 1890 and who supported communist causes without ever actually joining the
CPGB, was a very similar case. Her first biographer describes it as ‘an unhusbanded life’. However, there was no British communist to compare with the CPGB some four years after the break-up her marriage in 1923 and maintained an active political commitment, including participation in a delegation to Russia, while bringing her up children single-handed. Like her Labour counterpart Hannah Mitchell, she particularly mentioned the support she received from neighbours, and it is significant that both were from Lancashire, where traditions of support for married women’s activities outside the home may have been as important as their role in the workplace in explaining their greater participation in left-wing politics. Often in these areas there were also family networks of support, not necessarily implying endorsement of the specific activities undertaken, such as were more commonly available to men. Indeed, activists with children functioning as honorary men could be as reliant upon other family members as any male cadre. A pre-war activist who had separated from her husband thus sought to prevent her daughter’s marriage: ‘I can’t be the secretary of Bethnal Green party if you walk out of the family.’ Younger children, implicitly, could be regarded almost as a hindrance to activism, or their demands correspondingly neglected.

More often than celibacy, not having children was thus a possible corollary or precondition of women taking on major responsibilities within the party. Like other communist parties, and like the ILP in Britain, the CPGB was notable for the number of married couples in its leadership, providing three of its five women executive members by the late 1940s. However, there was no British communist to compare with Jeanette Vermeesch, wife of Maurice Thorez and the leading woman member of the pro-natalist PCF, who in 1946 simultaneously celebrated the birth of her third child and her re-election as a communist deputy. Prominent women cadres in Britain either did not have children, like Tamara Rust, Salme Dutt and Betty Matthews, or had only one child, like Isabel Brown. Where such women did have children, they sometimes found that efforts to maintain their political activities were sometimes frowned upon. Marjorie Pollitt’s efforts to retain political independence from her husband did not always meet with the approval of the family’s women friends, while in sending her son to a ‘progressive’ school, Frieda Brewster found that even in Lancashire local women comrades muttered that she couldn’t ‘be bothered to look after him like we do’. Dominique Loiseau observes that women in activist roles were constantly required to justify themselves in relation to their traditional functions, while the man in such a situation ‘has nothing to prove, he is where he belongs’. Frequently, this was true in relation to other women as well as men.

Two throwaway remarks suggest how different these expectations really were. Before Arthur Horner proposed to his future wife Ethel in 1916, he was warned against such an action by his syndicalist mentor, Noah Ablett, who believed it would stop him enrolling at the Central Labour College. Alert to bourgeois traps, Horner therefore interrupted his marriage proposal to spell out what was usually left unsaid on such occasions: ‘that the Movement would always come first’. As good as his word, he joined the Irish Citizens’ Army two months into married life and learnt of the arrival of his first daughter while still in Dublin. One could contrast this with the pungent reflection of another young revolutionary, this time in the 1950s, that ‘many times wished I was single so I could have really gone to town on building the YCL but of course “love” comes first’. Seemingly so divergent, the quotations no doubt bear witness to the passage of time and the arrival of the party family. On the other hand, it goes without saying that the second writer was a woman. ‘Love’ and ‘the movement’ coming first were the division of labour on which so many party households were based.

Women and liberation: red rags and party bulls

The CPGB approached its fiftieth anniversary without a full-time women’s organiser, relying instead on the voluntary efforts of the 65-year-old Bessie Leigh. A party member since 1930, and for twenty years a mainstay of its national women’s committee, Leigh doubtless had many virtues. However, she was neither politically nor temperamentally prepared for the the explosive entrance at this point of the women’s liberation movement (WLM), and in this she was at one with much of her party. Quite apart from its generally unsettling impact, women’s liberation posed three specific challenges to the cohesion and established identity of British communism. One was that for many of its proponents feminism implied a critique of Soviet-style socialism, and the productivist key to emancipation in the soaring Russian output of vacuum cleaners. A third was that it risked upsetting the party’s core industrial constituencies, not only through the possible threat to shibboleths like free collective bargaining, but as a direct challenge to sexist symbols like the ‘cheesecake’ photos...
which—until the issue was vigorously raised by some of the paper’s women journalists—were a regular feature of the Morning Star. For all these reasons, there seemed to be a broad fit between feminism and the more liberal attitudes identified with Eurocommunism; or at least it is true that committed Eurocommunists nearly always paid at least lip-service to feminist principles. On the other hand, that some women resisted that equation on the basis of their own beliefs and personal histories only further underlines how complex the interconnections between feminism, socialism and even Stalinism really were.

Most of the feminists who began to disturb the equilibrium of the family party were in their twenties or early thirties: as Florence Keyworth recalled, it was a ‘generation thing’. For many of them, the formative influences of feminism and socialism were thus encountered more or less simultaneously and inseparably. Val Charlton, a schoolteacher and sculptor active in nursery campaigns in Islington, joined the party in 1968, attended the first WLM conference at Ruskin College in 1969 and two years later was nominated for the CPGB executive. Also in Islington, Elizabeth Wilson was then a social worker who had been active in both the women’s and gay liberation movements and joined the CPGB in the early 1970s. If Wilson saw the CPGB as offering a space for feminist politics denied by more zealous and alienating rivals, she was also drawn by the communists’ aura of ‘reality’, at least in comparison with the North London libertarian left and the machinations of the local Labour Party. She particularly identified this feeling with a local community activist, Marie Betteridge, a party member since 1942 who confounded gender stereotypes by her political practice and was regarded by younger feminists as in some respects a forerunner. ‘I suppose that was an additional kind of incentive really, that one would be working with her’, Wilson recalled, and the importance of inter-generational influences in the increasingly distinctive step of joining the communist party again seems confirmed.

The existence of established party members willing to support the younger feminists was consequently of considerable significance. A few were of the same age group, but through party families or other contacts had been inducted into communist politics from an early age. The most outspoken and polemical of these was Beatrice Campbell, born six years after Charlton in 1947, but a party member from 1965, a journalist at the Morning Star and initially even a vocal opponent of the feminists. Among older supporters, a variety of subterranean lineages can be detected. Of the party’s staple readings, probably only Engels’s Origins of the Family set readers thinking on feminist lines, though exceptionally

Dora Cox had read Bebel and Kollontai’s Communism and Woman, thanks largely to her father having lived in Russia and been in close touch with Russia revolutionary circles. Betty Harrison and Marian Jessop possibly owed more to their upbringing in Labour movement families in West Yorkshire in the first decades of the century. Both were involved by their fathers in their political activities, and Jessop described how hers had encouraged her to take on what were conventionally regarded as men’s responsibilities. Harrison, like Cox, was a strong supporter of the younger feminists, while Jessop, now married to Bert Ramelson, wrote a history of the women’s movement predating the emergence of second-wave feminism.

Harrison had also worked as a trade union official since 1939, while other older pro-feminists like Gladys Brooks, Betty Matthews and Florence Keyworth had begun work for the party or Daily Worker in the 1940s, when women’s roles were less circumscribed than they later became. This was also the age of the ‘Pelican mind’: Florence Keyworth, one of its characteristic products, was denied the university education enjoyed by her brothers, but visited the Sheffield public library and read classic feminist texts like Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Virginia Woolf’s Room of One’s Own. She was also one of the many communists of her generation influenced by Shaw, whose Intelligent Woman’s Guide included provocative arguments for the recognition of women’s economic independence. More distinctively, Keyworth was subsequently a devotee of the feminist psychoanalyst Karen Horney, discreetly taking copies of her writings with her on Daily Worker reporting assignments. However, should she venture a ‘mildly feminist remark’ to her colleagues at the paper, she would find herself addressed for days afterwards as Mrs Pankhurst.

Of course, many male communists were virulently opposed to feminist arguments, and King Street regarded with undisguised concern such unauthorised initiatives as the socialist-feminist magazine Red Rag, appearing in 1971 in defiance of party rules. Equally significant, however, was the opposition of older communist women, many of whom could not be generally classified as ‘hardliners’. Some even of those sympathetic to the younger women found their aggressiveness ‘puzzling and almost frightening’, as if undermining the culture of comradeship on which the party, and the party marriage, had been based. Separatism, and the received ‘anti-man aspect’ of the WLM, were rejected for the same reason. Without necessarily regarding themselves as honorary male comrades, in many cases this also reflected a sense of having overcome gender distinctions at a personal level,
whether within or beyond the party. Although by this time no longer a party member, Dorothy Wedderburn was one of those who looked somewhat askance at the women’s movement on the basis of her experiences of the sexually egalitarian structures of the party’s Cambridge branches. ‘I think this is particularly important for a woman, the training of a sort of feeling of responsibility, enabling you to make your contribution to discussion and to take on these, quote, leadership roles’, she recalled, and as a successful academic had confronted at a personal level many of the issues with which feminists were later grappling.207

At the same time, some women refused the feminists’ critique of traditional class politics, though not necessarily the commitment to an expanded conception of women’s rights. In Sheffield, Vi Gill was committed to the development of women’s activism within the unions, reaching out to issues like abortion rights and nursery provision, yet felt no affinity with the WLM or Eurocommunism.208 Also in Sheffield, the party’s women’s organiser described the feelings not of empowerment but inferiority and exclusion aroused by the marxist-feminist theories of ‘highly intellectual university people, women’s lib etc’: ‘I sometimes wonder if even they know what a nuclear family, etc, is.’209 Elizabeth Wilson, who did know, co-authored a pamphlet, Class Politics, not entirely free of such alienating language, but nevertheless articulating traditional communist values against the ‘newer left’ associated with Marxism Today.210

Examples like this suggest the continuing centrality of traditional Labour movement perspectives to the British left. In relation to the New Left, Nigel Young ascribed the differences between its British and American variants to the persistence in Britain of a ‘massive and institutionalised working class with a still distinctive culture’.211 In complex ways this also affected the ‘old’ left itself, providing in the shape of the CPUSA a comparator with the CPGB and a further complicating factor in party alignments. Excluded from any significant labour movement presence, American communists had from as early as the late 1940s combined an orientation towards marginalised social constituencies with an embattled pro-Sovietism and the use for diverse ends of traditional ‘Stalinist’ methods of denunciation, self-criticism and the erosion of any sense of a private and politically unaccountable sphere.212 In contrast with Britain, ‘cheesecake’ was already abolished, ‘male chauvinism’ within the party systematically targeted and publications like de Beauvoir’s Second Sex given an enthusiastic reception.213 One communist influenced by this example was Dorothy Kuya, who had joined the YCL in 1946 and became increasingly critical of the CPGB’s complacency on issues of both race and gender. Particular influences included the deported black American communist Claudia Jones, whom Kuya got to know in London in the early 1960s, and the Angela Davis campaign of the 1970s. Frustrated in her efforts to develop the National Assembly of Women into a multi-ethnic women’s organisation on an American prototype, Kuya left the CPGB in 1984.214

Mikki Doyle, the Morning Star’s women’s editor, was herself an American: a Jewish recruit to the New York party of the 1930s, who for a time functioned as a full-time worker campaigning for ‘Negro Rights’. Coming to Britain when her British-born husband was deported in 1953, she initially worked in industry, where she was one of the few women secretaries of a party factory branch, and later ‘bluffed’ her way into advertising on the basis of her party leaflets. She was also a friend of Claudia Jones, whom she had put up on her arrival in Britain in 1956.215 This was a distinctive history, and in the disputes that divided the party in the 1980s it gave her a distinctive position, unambiguously a ‘Tankie’ on general issues but demonstrating feminist commitments on the Morning Star’s women’s page that were recognised even by the paper’s critics.216

Again the interaction of social, political and generational influences confounds straightforward typologies. Writing in more general terms, June Hannam and Karen Hunt have argued that a life-history approach tends to throw into question the rigidities of demarcation which historians often bring to their materials. ‘If attention is paid to the lives of individual women, then what emerges is a complex narrative in which it is difficult, if not impossible, to categorise women neatly in terms of whether or not they had a “feminist” approach or were women-centred in their politics.’217 Though this is borne out by the many ambiguities and transitions traced here, the sense that these distinctions and transitions could matter profoundly was no less important. Frieda Brewster had long since separated from her first husband Pat Devine when she was introduced to the women’s movement in her sixties by her communist daughter. ‘She was very much a feminist and through her I discovered the feminist movement, and you know, I thought: this is what I’ve been looking for. This is what I’ve wanted all my life, and now here are these young women and they’re doing it.’218
If being a communist in Britain meant adopting a sort of outsider status, it is not surprising that outsiders to British society should have figured prominently among the CPGB’s supporters. ‘Aliens, Jews and Sinn Feiners’, was how the Special Branch characterised one early pro-Bolshevik audience, and its weekly reports on the revolutionary left constantly alluded to its extrinsic character. If any one person symbolised this at the heart of the party leadership, it was Rajani Palme Dutt: Cambridge born and an Oxford graduate, but of Indo-Swedish parentage, married to an Estonian, resident for twelve years in Brussels and with a heart that beat to the measure of the Kremlin chimes. Comrades and colleagues—there were few friends—repeatedly alluded to Dutt’s remoteness or exoticism, likening him to the Pope or a Buddhist monk, or bristling at the ‘letters from afar’ that he contributed to the deliberations of the British party. Far from playing down his ambiguous national identity, Dutt ascribed to the ‘mixed national traditions’ of his home the ‘strong current of hostility’ he felt towards the British state and empire. In May 1940, as Pollitt reaffirmed the CPGB’s indigenous roots by the dedication to his mother of Serving My Time, Dutt inscribed his more cerebral testament India Today to his father Upendra Krishna Dutt, ‘who taught me the beginnings of political understanding—to love the Indian people and all peoples struggling for freedom’. Dutt will have seen Pollitt’s text before publication, and this may perhaps be interpreted as a coded signal of the conflicts between the ‘national’ and the ‘international’—both as concept and institution—which the two had lately fought out over the issue of the war. Five years later, Dutt stood for parliament to challenge the unabashedly imperialist Indian secretary, Leopold Amery. Though his prospective Birmingham constituents were largely unmoved, the resulting publicity proved an ‘Open Sesame’ when the following year Dutt was at last allowed by the authorities to visit what he called ‘the land of my fathers’.

Exemplified by Dutt, the ‘alien’ character of British communism was twofold. First, at every level, from its general secretaries to the casual communist voter, the CPGB depended disproportionately on groups falling outside what has implicitly been constructed as a core ‘English’, or loyalist British, majority of the population. Though not exactly referring to them as aliens and Sinn Feiners, the party’s first academic historian, Henry Pelling, did describe the delegates at the party’s foundation congresses as ‘consist[ing] of persons of non-English origin’, whether Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe or industrial militants in Britain’s ‘Celtic fringe’, themselves often of Irish origin. Even among the intellectuals, Pelling contrasted the transience of the party’s early English adherents with Dutt’s persistence ‘amid a working-class group of predominantly Celtic origin’. Writing in a more positive sense, Gary Werskey invoked the alien eye with reference to the non-English origins of left-wing intellectuals like J.D. Bernal and Hyman Levy. Though no facile links with ethnicity are proposed, it is also significant that Stuart Macintyre’s ‘little Moscows’ were all located outside of England, for that—with the exception of London’s Jewish East End—is where these little Moscows were mostly to be found.

Subliminally or explicitly, ethnic definitions of the outsider were linked with the idea of communism itself as something alien, ‘artificial’ or exogenous to British society. While acknowledging the CPGB’s links to British socialist traditions, Pelling suggested that even before the party’s formation, marxism in Britain had depended on constant transfusions of strength ‘from abroad’, notably European social democracy and syndicalist currents of transatlantic origin. Walter Kendall, in similarly depicting the CPGB as ‘a stranger in its own country’, stressed not only the obvious ‘Russian influence’, including Russians long settled in Britain, but the ‘Calvinistic’ attitudes of the mainly Scottish SLPers who came to dominate the new party, and the ‘slavish’ fixation on the American SLP which they then transferred to the Bolsheviks. This idea, that the communist party represented what Léon Blum called ‘un parti nationaliste étranger’, has been central to communist historiography. The communists’ seeming dependence on a continuous, systematic and unequal relationship with the USSR, older insinuations as to the unpatriotic nature of socialism now acquired a new force and credibility, culminating in the image of the spy or traitor lacking the most basic
instincts of national loyalty. Dutt himself was described by both Orwell and Maurice Reckitt, not exactly as an alien; but as ‘deracinated’. According to Reckitt, an associate of Dutt’s guild socialist days, his antipathies were concentrated ‘not against the bourgeoisie in general, but specifically against the British governing class’, so that even his denunciations of Hitler seemed ‘detached and almost bored by comparison’.

Drawing on the same stock of images, the labour historian Royden Harrison described him as ‘the Rootless One’.

Famously, Orwell linked the left’s disavowal of conventional patriotism with the notion of a transferred sense of allegiance, in this case to Soviet Russia. This has also been linked with the alien eye, with ‘mixed national traditions’ being associated with a sense of indeterminacy to which the stable anchorage of the workers’ party and fatherland provided a form of resolution. Neither fully Jewish nor fully an ‘Englishman’, it was thus that Alfred Sherman described the embrace of communism as giving ‘the dejudaised Jew, or partially dejudaised Jew, an identity’. Harrison even depicted Dutt as a ‘man without a country… at one with the new Leviathan as few of his comrades could be’, and in an eerie echo of the cold-war discourse of ‘cosmopolitanism’ linked him in this respect with the three Jews, Rothstein, K lugmann and Ramelson. Any suggestion that the only alternative to conventional patriotism was what Orwell described as a substitute ‘patriotism of the deracinated’ needs treating cautiously. The idea that communism itself can be regarded as a form of ethnicity is perhaps debatable. Nevertheless, communism not only provided its adherents with a worldview of comparable scope, but one in which a strong current of internationalism offset particular allegiances, whether adopted or seemingly innate, while at the same time shaping the ways in which ethnic identities were themselves constructed, negotiated and contested. Though providing a sense of belonging that became confused with insignia created or appropriated by the Soviet state, the notion of an ‘international brotherhood’ was defined in terms of values as well as loyalties, with the constant potential for conflict between the two.

Though the alien eye sits comfortably with emphases on migration and unsettlement in the making of communist allegiances, it is therefore as a relative concept, irreducible to any single focus either of alienation or of belonging. Neither an abstract ‘ethnicity’, used as a catch-all for minority groupings, nor what Pelling described as ‘sectionalism’ can capture this fluidity. Where there was a strong sense of otherness from British institutions, this itself engendered the most varied responses, from outright repudiation to a desire to integrate, these in turn reflecting the diverse patterns of attachment and attenuation which ethnic identities themselves generated. Through the mixing of national traditions, a critical ‘alien eye’ could be turned on the customs and power relationships of minority communities as well as British society as a whole; and while aliens, Jews and Sinn Feiners provided a basis of communist support, ‘parsons, priests and rabbis’, and the employment of ‘nauseating appeals to religious and national sentiment’, were seen as the communists’ natural enemies, not least by those who had grown up under their influence.

Further complicating matters, the role of communism in the equation was far from static. Though at various times the CPGB sought to accommodate or provide a vehicle for different forms of ethnic identity, this was always held in check by the cultivation of unity as the party’s highest virtue. Moreover, whether to complement, mitigate or dissimulate its relations with the world communist movement, the CPGB from the 1930s developed its own native version of the national-particular. Philosophically and pragmatically, this meant that claims of ethnicity were offset, not only by the unifying ideals of class and internationalism, but by a form of radical patriotism, English more often than British, that was itself constructed in opposition to the dominant narratives and power structures of the British state. It was thus that in the eighth year of a Conservative-dominated ‘National’ government, the writer Jack Lindsay could even advance the audacious claim that ‘Communism is English’. Elaborated in a series of historical novels and the radical-patriotic lineage of Lindsay’s anthology A Handbook of Freedom—‘a record of English democracy’ from Aelfric to Gallacher—the irony was not so much that Gallacher was Scottish, but that Lindsay himself was a product of the Australian literary avant-garde of the 1920s. Born and bred in Brisbane, he arrived in the ‘mother’ England that dominated his literary imagination when he was twenty-five.

Even so, for Lindsay and hundreds like him, communism in Britain was, in some paradoxical way, ‘English’: that is, it was not through the transportation into Britain of agitators and littératures of foreign origin, but through the interplay of ethnic identities and labour movement politics within Britain itself, that commitments to a communist politics typically emerged. Generally speaking, first-generation migrants either were not attracted to communism or else resisted absorption into the CPGB’s prevailing structures and priorities, which all too often seemed only too English. Conversely, where the party acted as a vehicle of politicisation within Britain, second-generation minority groupings were more readily integrated, and in periods and locations in which a communist presence
was still being established they sometimes provided its dominant tone. In Raphael Samuel’s memorable phrase, joining the CPGB in such circumstances provided ‘a way of becoming English’—though Englishness in this sense was as much a disclaimer of ethnicity as the particular form it took. An interviewee of mixed Jewish and Irish Catholic extraction put it perfectly; she never regarded herself as ‘anything but a normal English woman of no particular national affiliation’. But then, as one of Lindsay’s poems put it: ‘who are the English?’

Aliens, Jews...

Who the English or any other such grouping were eludes simple definition. Though ethnic identities were always characterised by difference from some perceived other, these constructions were malleable, internally contested, to some extent contingent and not always mutually exclusive. Often, it was precisely these tensions and uncertainties that proved a possible source of radicalisation, challenging the sense of a ‘common and distinctive history and destiny’ which ethnicity is held to represent, and fragmenting its claims of a ‘collective uniqueness and solidarity’ through the impact of other solidarities. That communism served as a way of negotiating or casting off conflicting identities means that the classifying of communists by discrete ethnic categories is highly problematic methodologically, to say nothing of ethical or political considerations. Among rough-and-ready identifiers, native language, country of birth, religious affiliations and surnames all provide valuable but partial or fallible indicators. More fundamentally, even to the extent that distinct ethnic groupings can be satisfactorily plotted, the establishment of correlations between these and patterns of political behaviour may need explaining, not by some essentialist conception of ethnicity, but by those particular experiences of work and society with which constructions of ethnicity, like those of gender and class, may nevertheless themselves in part be identified.

Of the several distinct minority groupings traceable within the CPGB, probably the most numerous, and certainly the one most extensively discussed in terms of ethnicity, was the party’s Jewish membership. Though fluctuating over time, and subject to the problems of definition already indicated, plausible estimates suggest that in the CPGB’s heyday Jewish members formed as much as 10 per cent of the party’s membership, a figure ten times that for the population as a whole. Symbolising the phenomenon were the victories in Stepney in 1945 of the Mile End MP, Phil Piratin, and all ten communist candidates in that year’s municipal elections. Accounting for these achievements, Piratin dwelt on the party’s ‘record of service to the people’, but the emergence of this active communist cadre can itself be understood only in the much wider context which Barnett Litvinoff described as the Jewish ‘infatuation’ with communism. Indeed the context was wider still, for a disproportionate Jewish membership had been characteristic of mass marxist parties even before the Russian revolution and the particular love-affair with communism needs to be located within the wider relationship between Jews and socialism.

Its relationship to existing Jewish identities has always been a contentious one. Although there long existed a distinctive Jewish socialist tradition in the shape of the Bund, socialism was embraced by figures like Luxemburg, Trotsky, Martov and the Austro-M arxists, not as an expression of Jewishness but as its transcendence or denial. For Isaac Deutscher, this was the phenomenon of the non-Jewish Jew, whose distinctive ethnic condition encouraged the challenge to nationally or religiously limited ideas and the striving instead for ‘a universal Weltanschauung’. Superficially this seems very different from joining the CPGB to become English. Samuel too, however, seems to have had in mind the escape from a ‘hereditary upbringing’ and the ‘narrowness of a religious environment’ into a more expansive identity that was not primarily defined in national terms at all. As Gwyn Williams pointed out in the analogous case of South Wales, speaking if not actually becoming English was the key to a wider culture in which Americans like Jack London and Upton Sinclair were among the foremost literary influences, and the internationalist creed of marxism had itself to be read in English—at least until the CPGB itself had the Communist Manifesto translated into Welsh in 1948.

Rejecting such emphases, historians like Henry Srebrnik and Sharman Kadish describe the CPGB’s Jewish enclaves as a form of ethnic mobilisation. There is a good deal on the surface appearing to support this argument. If on the one hand the CPGB’s very marginality suggests its limitations as a vehicle for integration into the national mainstream, the concentration of Jews in a relatively small number of well-defined urban communities profoundly shaped the character of local party organisations in those districts. In some respects they almost resembled the ‘Hebrew’ or Jewish unions and union branches previously established in the same areas. In Cheetham, Manchester, the YCL included a large number of woodworkers and upholsterers, whose union, the Furnishing Trades, had previously organised separate Hebrew branches, while conversely Jewish-dominated branches of the same union might be
remembered as ‘very party’ in character. Communist in these areas commented on the party’s ‘closeness’ in comparison with other areas—‘they were your neighbours and friends’—and something resembling a multiplex communist counter-community may to some extent be discerned there. In the classic case of Stepney, the hypothesis of an ethnic mobilisation is given further credence by the Irish Catholic domination of the local Labour Party. One of our Jewish interviewees from Stepney abandoned Labour for communism for precisely this reason.

While there were therefore different experiences and motivations in the Jewish embrace of communism, the majority experience in Britain was nevertheless closer to Detscher’s non-Jewish Jew than Srebrnik’s ethnic politician. Crucially, it was a second-generation phenomenon. There was little Jewish immigration into Britain after 1914 and few Jews figured among those who entered the CPGB at its foundation. Anarchist and Bundist groupings were conspicuous by their absence, while prominent Jewish revolutionaries in the BSP, notably Theodore Rothstein, Joe Fineberg and Maxim Litvinov, had returned to Russia by the end of 1920. A trickle of Jewish party members followed them during the 1920s, but apprehension at the prospect of deportation was said to deter first-generation migrants from identifying themselves with communist causes, and the CPGB itself delayed or refused admission to would-be recruits lacking British national status. For whatever reasons, even a future stronghold like Stepney had just thirty-six party members in 1927: a density only twice that for the country as a whole.

On the other hand, the CPGB was already beginning to attract its first second-generation Jewish migrants. These included Rothstein’s son Andrew, a leading party figure, and Fineberg’s British-born younger sister Annie, who at one point ran the CPGB’s children’s section. The greatest concentration of such members appears to have been in Manchester, where an outstandingly gifted YCL cohort included Max Haff, Jack and Gabriel Cohen, Hyamie Lee, Mick Jenkins and the three Ainley brothers. All of them went on to exercise district or national party responsibilities, while Jenkins, Haff, Lee and Gabriel Cohen also attended the Lenin School. Prefiguring the larger Jewish recruitment of the 1930s, the Manchester YCLers were hungry for culture and ideas as well as politics. ‘Their language, which on occasion could be lurid and debased, was normally above the intellectual level of everyone I knew, and was sprinkled with amazing, pregnant new words,’ wrote Margaret McCarthy, a normally above the intellectual level of everyone I knew, and was springing from their qualities. She singled out Hyamie Lee, in due course the most adaptable of Stalinists, as, at that time an eloquent, charismatic figure, conjuring up a future that sounds as if derived from H.G. Wells’s “Men Like Gods.”

Throughout the 1930s, Jewish recruitment gathered momentum. Though not necessarily younger than their gentile counterparts, Jewish recruits were perhaps more conscious of generational distinctions and more inclined to value the YCL as a space of their own, whether in relation to party or community elders. When Pollitt contested a Whitechapel by-election in 1930, his predominantly Jewish support produced a hundred claimed YCL recruits, compared with just sixty-seven for the party itself. Of 166 communists identified in 1939 as having died in Spain, the proportion of Jewish surnames among those identified as YCLers is several times that for the group as a whole. Some Jewish families reportedly had half a dozen siblings in the YCL, and in Middlesbrough there were ‘two or three’ of these families where the ‘lads’ all joined. In Cheetham, Stoke Newington and Middlesbrough itself, this predominantly Jewish youth movement overshadowed the local party branches both in size and level of activity. In Middlesbrough, one YCLer realised only belatedly that ‘the very small group of “elderly” men who sometimes sat in the corner, were the Middlesbrough CP’. Another was discouraged from joining the party to avoid any sense of deflation. For these youngsters the YCL provided an all-embracing social, cultural and political environment, and in rambles, dances and theatre excursions, as well as leafletings and pavement chalkings, many found their eventual marriage partners. These pronounced countercultural aspects, both of Jewish communism and of young people’s forms of political engagement, can be found very much reflected in Raphael Samuel’s later depictions of party life.

Probably second-generation Jewish communism is best regarded either as a form of acculturization or as one of its by-products. Neil Barrett comments that Jewish communists tended to wear their Jewishness lightly, and from within the CPGB Jack Cohen alleged a form of ‘Jewish anti-Semitism’ leading some ‘to deny contemptuously that they are Jews, to strive to hide this fact as something to be ashamed of, to look down on the “unemancipated” Jews, etc.’ Dating from the popular front period, such concerns reflected the party’s increasing emphasis on the carrying out of work among one’s ‘own’ community, whether defined by occupation, gender or ethnicity. In the CPUSA, where throughout the 1930s
Jews accounted for over a third of party cadres, a similar approach gave rise to a distinctive Jewish communist experience with its own summer camps, Yiddish-language press and social institutions. In Britain, by contrast, Jason Heppell has shown that it was among Jewish members themselves that the strongest resistance to ‘Jewish work’ was encountered, and this can be traced both in areas where they dominated mainstream party organisations and in the dispersed ‘Jewish street’ of the suburbs. Like Heppell, we have found little evidence of Jewishness itself being regarded as a cause of embarrassment, though in many cases it undoubtedly ceased to have a primary significance for the individual. One member recruited after the fascist violence at Olympia in 1934, described how, through ‘breaking away from the Jewish way of thinking and association with non-Jews’, he had ceased to look upon himself as a Jew, and regarded even the Holocaust as a larger human tragedy, not a Jewish one. A.L. Bacharach even described himself as ‘a Jew in everything except belief, customs, habits and mentality’, which does seem like a form of self-denial. However, as a sometime public schoolboy, Cambridge Fabian, guild socialist and respected food scientist, Bacharach was a highly atypical figure, representative if at all only of the assimilated Anglo-Jewish establishment which was not at all the primary source of the CPGB’s Jewish enrolment.

The rejection of inherited practices and beliefs nevertheless produced, or expressed, particularly marked inter-generational tensions. As Pollitt observed of the Whitechapel campaign, while the ‘older section of the Jewish community’ proved unmovable, there were ‘acute divisions and discussions… in hundreds of Jewish families between the younger section of the Jewish population and their elders’. H eppell has suggested that these tensions were reflected even within the CPGB, where a ‘Rabbinical faction’ centred on the party’s National Jewish Committee was rejected by a younger and relatively assimilated cohort of ‘Communist Jews’. It is indicative of the complexities of the concept of generation that the NJC’s ‘chief theoreticians’—the characterisation is Srebrnik’s—were both younger figures who nevertheless shared migratory experiences more characteristic of their elders. One of them, Lazar Zaidman, had been born in London in 1903, returning with his parents to Romania before being deported back to Britain as a communist in 1925. His relations with the CPGB were initially strained and in 1928 he lapsed from its Stepney branch because of what he later described as ‘language difficulties and clannishness’. G ravity to the Workers’ Circle, a left-wing Jewish friendly society, Zaidman set up the Hackney Study Group, subsequently the ‘nucleus’ of the CPGB’s Jewish work, while still an exile from the party’s ranks. Rejoining the party in 1933, when some years later Zaidman persuaded a protégé to act as secretary to the NJC, he neither required nor even encouraged him to take out membership of the party or the YCL.

Zaidman’s fellow ‘theoretician’, Chimen Abramsky, was born and brought up in the USSR where his father, a prominent rabbi, was arrested and expelled for anti-Soviet activities in 1931. Though he was meant to be inoculated against the Soviet education system by his private tutors, Abramsky was already drawn to the Jewish communist club in Moscow, and living in Palestine in the late 1930s took up the cudgels against ‘Trotskyists’ within the Jewish Labour Party. He joined the CPGB after settling permanently in Britain in 1939 and became a protégé of Dutt’s at the international department. Though Abramsky appears to have maintained relations with his father even after his initial embrace of communism, family relations in such circumstances were inevitably subject to acute strain. Predictably, those patterns were highly gendered. Given the attenuation of men’s more public religious roles, the continuing commitment to domestic religious observances of Jewish women was central to the maintenance of Jewish identities, and a number of communists particularly mentioned the distress their commitments caused their mothers. Across the generations, this suggests parallels with fathers and other older male relatives who themselves were sometimes remembered as secularising and even iconoclastic influences. On the other hand, because the performance of formal religious functions still fell exclusively to male offspring, they provided an obvious occasion for rebellion that was spared their sisters. Barney Barnett’s response to being bar-mitzvahed was to take out a subscription to the Freethinker, while at least three prominent future communists, the journalists Sam Russell and Geoffrey Goodman and the teacher David Capper, received an intensive religious instruction marking them out as possible rabbis. Capper even taught Hebrew at his London synagogue for some months after joining the CPGB at or near its foundation.

As well as possible conflicts over ideas and observances, involvement in communism meant challenging the roles and relationships of a relatively closed and patriarchal society. In Middlesbrough, its alienating character was symbolised by the quasi-parental relationship which an older non-Jewish couple, Ron and Molly Body, adopted towards the YCL branch which they had established. More generally, the YCL’s skewed composition meant that male Jewish members were drawn to what Rickie Berman calls ‘the ultimate step towards assimilation’, namely marrying
outside the Jewish community. Benny Rothman, a Cheetham YCL recruit of the late 1920s, was virtually disowned by his family and left the area to live near his new communist in-laws. A world apart in terms of social class, Jack Gaster, whose father was Sephardic Chief Rabbi in Britain, found that his marriage to a communist from a distinguished Irish literary family caused more distress than had his original commitment to revolutionary politics. For daughters, it was possibly even worse: Hettie Bower and Olivia Parsons, both from middle-class London backgrounds, were ‘blacklisted’ and the cause of ‘consternation’ on account of marriages entered into in the 1920s—though it may be noted that neither was yet herself in the party or YCL. Jewish families, however, were not the only ones who objected to ‘marrying out’. Monica Luxemburg married secretly in 1917 in case her Anglican family rejected her husband of partly Jewish extraction, and when Rafa Kenton found most of her boyfriends in the Middlesbrough YCL her mother also disapproved—‘my first experience of anti-semitism’. She too, nevertheless, married ‘out’.

Though imposing a construction of Jewishness even upon the non-Jewish Jew, anti-Semitism was not a unifying factor across the generations, but if anything the reverse. Though sometimes an ancestral memory of the pogroms survived in the stories of older relatives, these might be linked with a celebration of the tolerance since experienced in Britain. For those brought up in Britain itself, on the other hand, the expectations this generated meant that the persistence of anti-Semitism was more of an issue than its relative restraint. Though occasionally overt prejudice was experienced even in heavily Jewish areas, it was most often encountered by those whose homes or schools lay outside those areas, or who sought work beyond what were earmarked as ‘Jewish’ occupations. Paradoxically, though Hymie Fagan described the Bethnal Green in which he grew up as almost ‘East European’, he felt himself to be ‘not a stranger in a strange land but an English boy’. It was only on moving to Romford in Essex that he became aware of his family being ‘different to the rest’ and experienced open anti-Semitism. Not infrequently such antagonism is identified with areas large Irish Catholic populations. Geoffrey Goodman, for example, recalled making trips to Hebrew classes ‘through a very strong, particularly Catholic area, of Stockport [where] we used to be attacked almost nightly’. Like others in the old industrial Britain, it was, however, only after moving south in his teens that Goodman was sucked into the anti-Mosley movement and thence into the YCL. ‘I suppose you would say I was receptive...’

In politicising the issue of anti-Semitism, fascism further accentuated the generational divide. Communism in this perspective stood for combativity, including physically taking on the fascists, while the communal elites and the ‘far too bloody respectable’ Labour Party counselled only caution. In the run-up to the largest and most spectacular confrontation with the Blackshirts, at Cable Street, Stepney, in 1936, synagogue elders are recalled fatalistically likening them to the Tsarist Black Hundreds and warning Jews to keep away. As Willy Goldman observed, the youngsters viewed the violence less philosophically. ‘We felt ourselves English and outraged. We wanted to go and fling bottles at their windows.’ Sometimes these confrontations drew on the loyalties and street credentials of childhood gangs already used to defending their patch and it was precisely such associations which troubled communist leaders now bent on more of a popular-front approach. ‘Avoid clashes... no excuse for Government to say we, like BUF, are hooligans’, ran the party’s original advice regarding Mosley’s proposed march through Cable Street. Though the instruction was withdrawn, the view that the CPGB itself had become ‘far too bloody respectable’ is strongly expressed in at least one Jewish party memoir of the period.

As to whether Jewish communism should be regarded as a form of ethnic mobilisation, one test is the extent to which any distinct process of disillusionment can be traced to the growing tension between communism and Jewish national identity, as identified after 1948 with the state of Israel. Some such impact was acknowledged by the Stepney parliamentary candidate Solly Kaye, who ascribed a large role in the party’s decline in the East End to the ‘emotional’ attachment to Israel. This indeed drew at least one acknowledgement party member to take up arms as he might once have done for Spain. However, even among the party’s wider Jewish constituency, the decline in support was not obviously more precipitate than in other areas—Kaye himself remained a Stepney councillor until as late as 1971—and the movement from the East End to the suburbs must again be attributed in part to demographic factors. Moreover, many Jewish communists had rejected Zionism in the course of embracing communism, adopting a critical stance towards Israeli actions out of solidarity with the Arabs and not just the Russians. Connie Seifert was unusual in having been disillusioned with anti-Arab racism in Palestine even before she joined the CPGB in 1935, but her combining an attachment to Jewish culture with the repudiation of Israel was otherwise not unusual. Stanley Forman, whose given name was Israel, felt it such a stigma that he had it changed by deed poll.

On the other hand, just as fascism was a reminder of Jewishness even for the non-Jewish Jew, so the mounting evidence of Soviet anti-Semitism
had a profound impact on those who would not for themselves have claimed any distinctive Jewish position within communism. Some simply could or would not believe such disclosures. One reacted to the anti-Semitic Slansky of 1952 by abandoning Zionism for communism and leaving her adoptive homeland of Israel. Among those who even at this stage could not swallow this was the composer Benjamin Frankel, whose concerto In Memory of the Six Million had been written for the Festival of Britain only the previous year. Many others followed Frankel out of the party after the now unanswerable disclosures of 1956, including the playwright Arnold Wesker, the historian Henry Collins and the scientist Hyman Levy. When Levy was expelled in 1958 for criticising the USSR in his book Jews and the National Question, Chimen Abramsky, his publisher, resigned the same day. Like the Holocaust itself, the issue for many Jews was not Jewishness in the abstract but personal connections extending beyond across national boundaries. Hettie Bower, whose many Jews was not Jewishness in the abstract but personal connections extending beyond across national boundaries. Hettie Bower, whose

... Sinn Feiners

The Irish in Britain also combined the memory and experience of subjection with religious and cultural traditions which in many respects were antipathetic to communism. By the time of the CPGB’s foundation, links between Britain’s Irish diaspora and working-class organisation were well-established. In cities like Manchester, where as much as a sixth of the population was of Irish extraction, they provided Labour with some of its most steadfast supporters. However, coloured by allegiance to the Catholic church, they were also identified with ultra-conservative attitudes to many social and political issues, so that ethnic diversity served in this case to reinforce Labour’s economism and a form of electoral calculation that forswore alienating core constituencies on issues like birth control and secular education.

Catholics also provided the strongest anti-communist bloc within the Labour movement. Reinforced by the ‘godless’ image of Bolshevism, they were by common consent ‘the staunchest of working-class anti-Communists’, and in Ireland itself the social conservatism of the Free State was matched only by the feebleness of its succession of overt or surrogate communist parties. Conversely, within the early Communist Party of Ireland (CPI), groups marginal to the Catholic nationalist majority were over-represented and the party’s first secretary, Walter Carpenter, was also secretary of the so-called ‘Jewish Union’ of clothing workers. That a pronounced Irish strain was nevertheless discernible within the early CPGB may therefore suggest once again the importance of migratory factors in the unsettling of established political allegiances, assisted in the short term by the temporary convergence of revolutionary nationalism and working-class militancy.

In the recent history of the British Isles, Ireland provided the one authentic insurrectionary experience, both as premonition and domestic variant of the European revolutions of 1919–23. As veteran internationalists with no special Irish connections, Eden and Cedric Paul recorded how at the time of the 1916 Easter Rising ‘many of us who regard all nationalism as medieval were almost ready... to exchange the red flag for the green’. As we have seen, the republican green was also taken up by Arthur Horner, who enlisted in its colours in Dublin, and by the radicalised Birmingham business manager, H.W. Emery, who was involved in illegally procuring arms for the IRA. Similar connections were also made in reverse, and support for the aims and methods of the Irish struggle sometimes translated into communist attachments. In Hurst, near Ashton-under-Lyne, a M oira Mackay, about whom we otherwise know little, had her children baptised Lenin, De Valera and Rosa Luxemburg by the ‘communist’ vicar, R.W. Cummings. Four years later, she was described as a ‘fearless fighter of and for Ireland and the world proletariat’, a victim of several imprisonments who could hold a Stockport audience ‘with fire’.

They followed the sufferings of the Irish proletariat. She carried them through the Egyptian crisis, and made that working-class
crowd understand how near the Sudanese cotton workers are to Lancashire and Cheshire workfolk.

There was no reference now to De Valera, and the arrival of a little Trotsky as well as a Clara Zetkin Mackay suggests already the possibility of a disillusioned name change. One can only conjecture whether Trotsky later went the same way.

Temporarily, the linking of Bolshevism and Fenianism also provided pockets of communist electoral support. In Motherwell, Walton Newbold’s election as communist MP in 1922 also depended on a republican vote drawn by Newbold’s longstanding association with Irish self-determination. In Dundee in 1923, the volatile Irish labour leader Jim Larkin was invited to assist Gallacher specifically on grounds of these associations. Nevertheless, like the so-called soviets of war-torn Ireland, the phenomenon was essentially contingent. Already by 1923, Newbold was exercised by the possible mobilisation of Catholic loyalties against his candidature, and warned of the ‘absolutely calamitous effect’ of the Bolsheviks’ attacks on religion. Although in that year’s election it was again reported that his supporters were mainly Catholic steel workers, Newbold, unlike Gallacher, declined to have Larkin speak in a constituency divided on sectarian lines. ‘We are avoiding, as much as possible...the whole Irish feud’, he wrote. ‘We fight purely on the class issue.’

While marginally increasing his poll, Newbold lost the seat and any future repetition of his success was unimaginable. In Cumberland, where in 1926 the CPGB recruited substantially among Catholic miners, a ‘mass attack by the Catholic Church’ was said to have damaged it. In Dundee in 1923, the volatile Irish labour leader Jim Larkin was invited to assist Gallacher specifically on grounds of these associations. Nevertheless, like the so-called soviets of war-torn Ireland, the phenomenon was essentially contingent. Already by 1923, Newbold was exercised by the possible mobilisation of Catholic loyalties against his candidature, and warned of the ‘absolutely calamitous effect’ of the Bolsheviks’ attacks on religion. Although in that year’s election it was again reported that his supporters were mainly Catholic steel workers, Newbold, unlike Gallacher, declined to have Larkin speak in a constituency divided on sectarian lines. ‘We are avoiding, as much as possible...the whole Irish feud’, he wrote. ‘We fight purely on the class issue.’

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In these circumstances, the significance of links with the British left for the maintenance of an Irish fascist tradition has perhaps been too little recognised. Initially, these owed much to the vesting of Comintern authority in the CPGB, with key decisions like the winding up of the first Irish communist party and the cultivation of Larkin’s Irish Workers’ League owing a good deal to the suggestion or instigation of the British party. Several British communists went on missions to Ireland, including Pollitt, who visited in 1924, and Bob Stewart, who in 1925 spent five months trying to launch an Irish workers’ party. Neither had any known connection with the country, and it is not surprising that Arthur Mac Manus should have noted the antagonism of Irish communists towards the CPGB on the grounds that ‘they were neither a colony nor a dependency’.

Mac Manus himself, however, represented an older tradition by which the circulation of movements and ideas, across the Atlantic as well as the Irish Sea, had played a seminal role in the development of Irish socialism. Born into a Sinn Fein family background in Glasgow, as an activist in the Clyde Workers’ Committee Mac Manus had already in 1916 gone to Ireland to help build up the SLP. Even Connolly, founding father of Irish socialism, was a Scot ‘by birth, residence and speech’, initiated into politics through the Edinburgh Socialist League and the SDF. Connolly’s only peer as a socialist and nationalist, James Larkin, was likewise born in Liverpool, where he joined the ILP at the age of seventeen. These were not untypical, and the continuing freedom of movement between the two countries remained a possible factor in the making of Irish communists. The most important of them was Sean M urray, secretary in turn of both the Irish and Northern Ireland communist parties and an Antrim-born former IRA commandant who embraced socialism after reading Connolly in Glasgow in 1922. Remaining in Britain, Murray joined Larkin’s Irish Workers’ League and was secretary of its London branch, the only one outside of Dublin which actually functioned. After joining the CPGB in 1925, he was selected for the Lenin School as a member of the party’s London district committee, and it was only on completing the school’s ‘long’ course in 1930 that he was directed back to work in Ireland, initially under the direction of Bell and Stewart. It was on Bell’s departure in 1931 that he joined the secretariat of the Revolutionary Workers’ Groups, forerunner of the relaunched Irish communist party.
At least until he went to the Lenin School, there was little that was remarkable about Murray's trajectory. Into the 1950s and beyond, Irish-born recruits of religious and often strongly nationalist upbringing can be traced making the transition to socialism after coming to Britain, where communism proposed the solidarity of the British and Irish labour movements as the key to achieving real Irish emancipation.100 Those who returned to Ireland are usually lost to our own research, like the two other former CPGB members whom Barry McLaughlin mentions among the twenty-one Irish students at the Lenin School.101 Others, however, built reputations in Britain. Born during the First World War into Dublin's small Jewish community, Maurice and Max Levitas joined the YCL in Whitechapel, Max serving for some twenty-five years as a Stepney councillor, while Maurice fought in the International Brigade, 'as proud of his Irish background as he was of his Jewish one'.102 Within Britain itself, where in cities like Manchester and Liverpool youngsters like the future IBer Sam Wild grew up feeling 'more Irish than English', similar transitions were effected, not by migration, but by exposure to secular influences within the Labour movement.103 One such case was Roger O'Hara, later CPGB secretary on Merseyside, brought up with a strong distrust of the British state, but drawn to communism through workplace contacts and his growing disillusionment with Catholic Labour organisations.104

Despite its continuing peripherality, the consolidation of communist organisation in Ireland, along with the expansion of Irish immigration after the war, meant that the CPGB increasingly gained recruits who had broken with mainstream republicanism in Ireland itself. Bob Doyle, for example, had taken part in the attack on Connolly House as a youth, but joined the CPGB as one of 150 Irish fighting against Franco—naturally, in the James Connolly Battalion.105 Also joining via the International Brigade, the small ex-CPI cohort also provides our one known case of a former member of a fascistic organisation—General O'Duffy's Army Comrades' Association, or 'Blueshirts'—joining the CPGB.106 Although born only in 1927, Brian Behan also had memories of campaigns over superstition', and secular influences like Wells and Shaw remembered as staging posts en route to socialism.113 Probably the most influential apostate was the physicist J.D. Bernal, whose hyper-rationalist cult of science concealed intriguing intersections between nation, faith and marxist ideology. Born in 1901 to a landed Catholic family in Tipperary, Bernal was an intensely religious child who at his Jesuit prep school led the other boys on night-long prayer vigils. During his teens he then adopted a form of romantic Irish nationalism that was fortified by the developing struggle against British rule. Nevertheless, due either to 'mixed national traditions'—his mother was an American of protestant origin—or a
hankering for the universalism of the church, he discarded his ‘narrow’ Irish patriotism for the vision of a ‘Scientific World State’, apparently in the course of a single night in 1919.114 Although the abruptness of the conversion has been questioned, three significant points may be made about it. The first is the persistence of a mystical strain in Bernal’s scientific emphasis on the single ‘orderly process’ governing the universe, as if the ‘freedom of necessity’ were substituting for the will of God.115 The second is that Bernal’s fervent identification with Bolshevism-Stalinism does appear like an example of Orwell’s transferred patriotism, albeit notionally in the context of the emerging ‘world state’.116 The third is that even this never quite obliterated Bernal’s original sense of self, so that in a modest and secular way he remained a supporter of the Connolly Association until his death.117

**Post-war arrivals**

Because of the continuous arrival and relatively easy assimilation of the Irish in Britain, the distinction between first and second generations so important in the Jewish case is muddled. In general, however, there does appear to be a pattern of first-generation migrants being less likely than their children to become integrated into the CPGB, and less likely still to the extent that they were involved in other types of political movement before coming to Britain. An example from the party’s early years is the Lithuanian Communist Federation (LCF). While the early CPGB had no language sections or publications like those existing in Australia, Canada and the USA, the LCF successor to the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party, was said to be ‘practically under CP influence’ and even to have affiliated to the CPGB. Its paper Rankpelnis (the Labour) reportedly sold some 3–4,000 copies mainly in the Lanarkshire coalfield, but folded as early as 1923. With the exception of few second-generation figures like miners’ leader Willie Allan, there is little further evidence of this strain within the CPGB.118

Somewhat on the same pattern, later migrant groups were at first encouraged to set up separate branch and leadership structures, though with varying degrees of success. As Hakim Adi has shown, an initiative like the West African branch of the 1950s was always fraught with tension and by 1960 comprised little more than a ‘closed small circle’.119 Organisations of Indian and Cypriot communists, on the other hand, were initially more successful. Set apart as they were by language and culture as well as a separate branch structure, these ‘national’ branches tended to regard the CPGB as the local franchisee of the international movement and to some extent this confirms the markedly federalist character which the party assumed in the post-war period.120 Presumably it was for this reason that these forms of organisation were abruptly discontinued in 1966, with mounting concern at the importation into the party of the widening divisions of international communism. Exactly as occurred when similar measures were adopted in the USA in the 1920s, immediate membership losses ensued. These included a third of Cypriot members, then comprising around a fifth of the declining London district membership.121 Among Indian communists, defections were more obviously political in character, and high-profile ‘anti-revisionists’ went on to play significant roles in bodies like the Indian Workers’ Association (IWA) and the Association of Indian Communists in Britain. In both cases, the most prominent party loyalists had been communists even before their arrival in Britain, with an internalised sense of discipline dating back to the Comintern period. George Pefkos, the editor of the CPGB’s Greek language newspaper Vema, was thus a member of the Cypriot communist party from as early as 1936, while Vishnu Sharma, who arrived in Britain in 1957, had been a full-time party worker in India since 1939. Both achieved positions of some prominence within the CPGB, Pefkos within the London district, and Sharma as an executive and political committee member in the 1970s and 1980s. That they represented a wider integration into party activities is more doubtful.

In the Caribbean region, there were no communist parties as such, but thriving organisations with anti-imperialist programmes which were closely aligned with the international communist movement. When activists in these movements came to Britain, they consequently gravitated to the CPGB as their natural political home, while bringing with them distinct perspectives and traditions of organisation making for tempestuous relations with the local party hierarchy. Particularly outspoken was a Guyanan cohort, several of whom came to Britain in 1953–4 after the overthrow of Cheddi Jagan’s People’s Progressive Party (PPP) administration and the suspension of the colony’s constitution.121 Critical faculties had in many cases been sharpened by involvement with the CPU SA, whose engagement with issues of race and gender contrasted with the more labourist perspectives of its British counterpart. Frank Bailey, for example, was a former PPP and CPU SA member who at a party school in 1957 made ‘a very bitter anti-all white people speech, saying British Labour movement, neither Right not Left had ever done anything for the colonial liberation movement’.122 The Trinidadian Ranji Chandrisingh, though not previously a PPP member, was educated in
Guyana and at Harvard, joining the CPUSA before coming to Britain in 1950. He too, though in a milder way, experienced difficulties over the CPGB’s position on the Empire. Migrants from other parts of the West Indies, such as the Jamaican Cleston Taylor, had also made contacts with black activists in the USA, and in Cleston Taylor’s case brought this perspective into the CPGB within days of arriving in Britain. Another former CPUSA member was Johnny Williamson, a Glasgow-born organiser deported to Britain in the late 1950s, who is said to have made strong criticisms of the CPGB in the early days of the American Civil Rights movement. Also deported to Britain was Claudia Jones, a Trinidadian by birth, who had held high positions in the American party including editing its Negro Affairs Quarterly. In the words of her fellow Trinidadian Trevor Carter, one of many younger activists for whom Jones was an inspirational figure, she brought with her the political outlook of ‘the only Western communist party that was steeped in the black experience’. Even within Britain, Dorothy Kuya recalled how reading American communist publications stimulated her to take a more critical position towards what she saw as the survival of colonialist attitudes within the CPGB.

Carter himself was a party loyalist, though a far from uncritical one, and after spending three years running the PPP’s party college in the early-1960s he injected a note of black radicalism into the CPGB until its dissolution. Whether reflecting earlier influences, like a reading of the Webb’s Soviet Communism, or divergent experiences within Britain itself, others found the party’s labour movement perspectives more attractive than what one described as ‘Nationalist Racialism’. The Jamaican Billy Strachan, the most influential figure on the party’s West Indian committee, was among those preferring integration into general party structures to the formation of national branches, perhaps reflecting earlier experiences of serving in Britain in the RAF and being converted to socialism by the Jamaican health minister David Smith. At the same time, Strachan also played a leading role in the London branch of the Caribbean Labour Congress (CLC), perhaps envisaged as performing complementary functions to the party in the manner of the Connolly Association. Nevertheless, Strachan’s running of the West Indian committee only deepened the divisions to be found on the committee itself as well as with the party apparatus. At the same time, a number of members returned to their countries of origin, particularly on achievement of independence. Chandrasingh, for example, eventually defected from the PPP to become general secretary of the ruling People’s National Congress under Guyana’s first independent premier Forbes Burnham—who was himself a former CPGB student member. Some, like Frank Bailey, who initially left the party over Jones’s running of the West Indian Workers’ Association, might be drawn to Trotskyism. Others, like the gifted and abrasive Guyanan Johnny James, who at first had continued to work for the PPP in Britain, were drawn towards Maoist platforms and the criticism of figures like Jagan. Even Strachan, a party loyalist, dropped out of both party and CLC activities when a King Street enquiry found in favour of his critics within the West Indian committee. The end result, according to Carter, was that through one cause or another the ‘vast majority’ of the party’s black members left in the decade after 1956.

Celtic identities

Latterday migrations notwithstanding, foremost among the marginal ethnicities Pelling referred to were those of what he called the ‘Celtic fringe’. Apart from the Jewish East End, Scotland and Wales provided the CPGB with almost all of its local concentrations of support, and in Scotland’s case with a roll call of national officials ending only with Gordon Maclellan’s retirement as general secretary in 1989. Here was even a ‘Scottish Connolly’ in the shape of John Maclean: the Clydeside agitator who after 1917 espoused a form of revolutionary Scottish republicanism which certainly bore out Pelling’s identification of celtic marxism with a distinctive ‘sectional’ hostility to ‘English’ institutions. Nevertheless, the linkage cannot be sustained as a general argument. Until his death in 1923, Maclean himself repudiated the CPGB as itself one of these ‘English’ institutions; and his significance for the party is precisely that it did not lay claim to this aspect of his inheritance, even while embroidering the legend of Scotland’s ‘greatest revolutionary fighter’. If it was acknowledged at all, his embrace of Scottish nationalism, like his rejection of the party itself, was ascribed by communists to the warping of his judgement by poor health and the psychological impact of his several imprisonments.

Partly influenced by Soviet nationalities’ policy, and partly by the legitimation of national agendas by the Comintern’s Seventh World Congress, the CPGB in the 1930s did slowly begin to promote the separate claims and aspirations of the Welsh and Scottish peoples. As early as 1934 a preliminary draft of the CPGB programme for Soviet Britain included the formula ‘a federal republic of Soviet Britain’. Although this was removed on Moscow’s objections, almost in the same breath the CPGB was instructed to discard the slogan Workers of the World, United—
a residue of ‘cosmopolitanism’ and ‘Luxemburgianism’—and replace it with the ‘Marxist-Leninist’ wording Proletarians of all Countries. If ‘all countries’ included ‘England’, it must also have meant Scotland and Wales too—a consideration specifically acknowledged by Lindsay and Rickwood in their Handbook of Freedom. By 1939, a bilingual party pamphlet celebrating the language, culture and national consciousness of Wales was being published for the Denbigh National Eisteddfod. In Scotland, a similar effusion by Aitken Ferguson came with the endorsement of the secretary of the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP). If Ferguson was indeed the culture-bashing ‘Clydebank Riveter’ of a decade earlier, the exogenous derivation of the new policy could hardly have been better demonstrated.

On the other hand, in both Wales and Scotland there existed sub-currents of left-wing cultural nationalism for whom these issues went deeper than the current party line. In both countries its most distinguished representative were poets. In Wales, this was T.E. Nicholas, editor in the 1930s of the short-lived Llais y Werin (People’s Voice) and a CPGB member from the party’s foundation until his death in 1971. Born in 1879, as a Congregationalist minister Nicholas had already co-founded an ILP branch in the Neath valley and acted as Welsh-language editor of Keir Hardie’s Merthyr Pioneer. He also preached Hardie’s funeral sermon in 1915, and in the 1918 election carried his mantle against the tub-thumping miners’ agent, C.B. Stanton. Though Nicholas then gave up orders to become a dentist, he formally remained a Christian, continued to write his Welsh-language poetry and, according to Robert Pope, adhered to communism not as a Marxist but as a ‘prophetic visionary’. In 1940 he was imprisoned with his son under Defence Regulation 18B, a tool otherwise deployed mainly against fascists. Combining ‘revolutionary internationalism, Welsh nationalism and pro-Sovietism’, according to his Scottish counterpart Hugh MacDiarmid, Nicholas was ‘a man of like quality’ to M acLean himself.

MacDiarmid for his part was almost unique between the wars. As a Remembrancer of the historian of the English revolution, Christopher Hill. In Wales too—a consideration specifically acknowledged by Lindsay and Rickwood in their Handbook of Freedom. By 1939, a bilingual party pamphlet celebrating the language, culture and national consciousness of Wales was being published for the Denbigh National Eisteddfod. In Scotland, a similar effusion by Aitken Ferguson came with the endorsement of the secretary of the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP). If Ferguson was indeed the culture-bashing ‘Clydebank Riveter’ of a decade earlier, the exogenous derivation of the new policy could hardly have been better demonstrated.

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MacDiarmid for his part was almost unique between the wars in deriving a similar synthesis from M aclean and expressing it both in verse and in the long rambling expositions of his ‘Red Scotland line’. Born Christopher Murray Grieve in 1892, his life was one of many singularities. Having already been expelled from the SNP as a nationalist, in 1937 he was expelled from the CPGB as a Scottish nationalist, a decision confirmed when he continued his attacks on the party’s ‘moral and intellectual bankruptcy’ through his quarterly The Voice of Scotland. He also supported the Social Credit schemes of Major Douglas, a fellow Scot regarded by communists as fascist in tendency, and actively assisted in disseminating Douglas’s writings. Still following his own course, M acDiarmid rejoined the party only in November 1956, as a gesture of support for the Russian tanks in Hungary. Publicly he bore the party’s banner against Sir Alec Douglas Hume in the 1964 general election; privately his chauvinistic outbursts remained a potential source of embarrassment.

Although not always overtly nationalistic, and sometimes explicitly the reverse, the expression of a Scottish literary identity was also identified with less idiosyncratic writers like Lewis Grassic Gibbon, said on M acDiarmid’s authority to have been a party member in the 1920s, and James Barke, who, if he was not a communist, associated with the party in the most intimate way. In similar fashion, communists like George Ewart Evans and the CPGB’s North Wales secretary J. Roose Williams contributed actively to the Anglo-Welsh literary revival of the 1930s and 1940s. Williams, like Nicholas, was a Christian, a poet and a communist, spreading his gospel round north-east Wales by bike. Evans, just as characteristically, was a Cambridgeshire schoolteacher born in Abercynon, maintaining a sense of Welshness through his writing and winning Eisteddfod honours for a dramatisation of his own childhood memories of the Senghennydd mining disaster.

How these identities registered politically with working-class militants is more doubtful. In Wales, religious dissent provided a relatively congenial legacy which even communists cited as a positive influence, in a way that almost none did with regard to Catholicism; nor did it give rise to similar family antagonisms. Raphael Samuel’s suggestion that nonconformity provided a source of ‘moral capital’ for British socialists is not difficult to illustrate with communist examples, such as the life and work of the historian of the English revolution, Christopher Hill. In Wales itself, Idris Cox, district organiser with interruptions for nearly a quarter of century, has been located within a ‘Welsh Marxist tradition’ informed itself, Idris Cox, district organiser with interruptions for nearly a quarter of century, has been located within a ‘Welsh Marxist tradition’ informed
and the English language, the Welsh language, especially in the south, ‘became identified with the Nonconformist and Liberal past’. T hough in one aspect the sequel to a long dissenting lineage, militant socialism was thus the product of a massive demographic upheaval and concomitant process of secularisation, undermining, while simultaneously radicalising, the particularist cultures of the coalfield. Again, ‘fresh contacts’ helped the process on. Even Cox did not wrestle with marxism in his native Maesteg, though he first encountered it there, but at the Central Labour College in London. H aving been sent there as ‘one of Vernon Hartshorn’s blue-eyed boys’—a reference to the ultra-moderate miners’ agent and local MP—he returned to Wales a committed communist. S imilarly, in D ail Francis’s village of Onllwyn, where the chapel provided the focal point of a community-based collectivism as late as the 1920s, it was inward migration which produced a political ‘sea-change’. T his to some extent ‘was also a language shift as the language of progress and change was perceived universally to be English’.

T o a degree, this can be identified with the arrival of the English themselves. In the ‘little Moscow’ of Mardy, M acintyre notes how the lateness of economic development ‘accentuated the mix of English immigrants and those from the Welsh-speaking hinterland’, and in the Rhondda generally the emergence of militant socialism was strongly identified with newcomers to the area. In 1911, only one in twelve of the Rhondda’s inhabitants was English-born, and yet the three leading figures in its transition from syndicalism to communism—Noah Ablett, A.J. Cook and Arthur Horner—were all born in England or of English parentage. W ill Paynter, the next in a putative line of succession, had a Welsh father and an English mother. E ven Cox’s father was originally from Bristol, arriving in M aesteg via the Rhondda, and only learnt Welsh when he began attending chapel after his religious conversion. Cox’s was therefore a distinctive upbringing conveying the real complexity of these issues, as the parents addressed each other in English but their children in Welsh. Crucially, however, while speaking Welsh at home, Cox found that English was the language of his schooling and the miners’ lodge.

T he coalfield’s transition from boom to decay was so abrupt that footprints could lead both ways in the course of a single generation. Born in Gloucestershire in 1911, Arthur Exell moved with his family to the Rhondda as an infant, only to make the return journey on the 1928 South Wales Hunger March, settling permanently in Oxf ord the following year. H e joined the CPGB five years later and became a prominent figure in the local AEU. F rank Bright’s rather similar movements also reflected the mobility required of the professional revolutionary. Born in Bideford, Devon, in 1891 and moving to the Rhondda in 1911, Bright was a foundation CPGB member who attended the Lenin School in 1930–2 and held a number of party positions in Lancashire. H owever, he too ended up where he began—as district party organiser for Devon and Cornwall.

E ven so, what might appear as anglicisation was not primarily about being English at all. In the M aesteg party branch of the 1920s, Cox found that half of its six members were Irish, including ‘one [who] had fought in the IRA!’ S imilarly, in M ethyr and Aberdare, volunteers for Spain also included a number of lapse Catholics of Irish origin. O nllwyn’s unrivalled efforts in the same cause were attributed in part to the presence of a small Spanish community in nearby Aberc rawe. I n Neath, M iriam Llewellyn’s father was a Polish émigré and active marxist who experienced the other side of community solidarity on being cold-shouldered as a ‘Russian Jew’ during the First World War. C ases like this can be linked with ‘anglicisation’ only in the sense of a common language and culture based on class; just as class itself, while expressing the intensifying conflict between labour and capital in the coalfield, also represented a more viable basis for community whose unequalled cogency was precisely that it was not ‘sectional’. English was merely its lingua franca.

I n Scotland, sectarian animosities posed a challenge to the counter-argument of class that had few British parallels. I n M othewher, we have seen how N ewbold finally took his stance ‘on the class issue’, and the logic of this position was widely accepted. I n any case, Scottish nationalism, far more than the Irish republicanism on which N ewbold had drawn, was seen as irrelevant to such a perspective. A ccording to H arry M cShane, it was K ing Street, overruling the party’s Scottish committe, which in the late 1930s insisted on overtures being made to the nationalists. O n the question of expelling M acDiarmid, the Scottish party again took the most resolute stance. I n a ‘Scottish’ issue of L et R evew, J ames B arke remarked on how obvious it was to the Clydeside engineer that there was ‘no real Scottish national question’ and ascribed the attempt to concot one to middle-class intellectuals and English press barons.

T here were exceptions. A Clydeside engineer who did admire M acDiarmid was J immy Reid, who also studied T om J ohnston’s H istory of the W orking C lass in Scotland and, as the CPGB’s Scottish secretary in the 1960s, strongly supported Scottish self-government. I ronically, however, Reid’s main supporters on the Scottish committee were two English women, the journalist H onor Arundel and an Inverness communist councillor, M abel Sk inner. F ormerly of the party’s Surrey district, and on her first arrival in Scotland encountering a threefold hostility on
grounds of sex, politics and nationality. Skinner assimilated well enough to join the local Gaelic Committee and act as Macc Diarmid’s election agent in 1964. Only seemingly paradoxical, communists sensitive to national demands often worked from general postulates, like ‘Marxist-Leninist internationalism’, as much as from any passionate sense of national selfhood. Appropriately, it was Dutt who of national party officials is said to have been most sympathetic to Cox’s advocacy of a Welsh parliament, and when Cox was removed from Wales it was to work with Dutt in the international department. Similarly, though little concern was expressed concerning the party’s general indifference to these questions of self-government, one of the exceptions was a former colonial official of strong anti-imperialist convictions resulting from his own personal experiences in Nigeria. Joining the CPGB as the ‘only organisation which had correct line in African affairs’, it must have seemed logical to expect the same correct line on Scotland and Wales too.

On the other hand, it was not Britishness, let alone Englishness, that Labour movement figures like Arthur Horner opposed to Welsh or Scottish particularism. Rather it was the idea of class, realised within the framework of the British state. For miners in particular, this was an idea of formative significance. Though Horner explained his identification with Ireland’s goals as coming readily to a ‘small nationality’ like the Welsh, his guiding ambition was one of miners’ unity on a national, that is a British, scale: not a miners’ federation, but a national union of Welsh, his guiding ambition was one of miners’ unity on a national, that is a British, scale: not a miners’ federation, but a national union of miners, and not workers’ control of the industry, but the vesting of its ownership in the British state. Even within South Wales, Cox described as one of Horner’s greatest achievements his being elected full-time agent for the Welsh-speaking anthracite district, ‘bearing in mind that... Arthur was well known for his ignorance of the Welsh language’. In relation to Ireland, Pollitt in the 1920s protested strongly against proposals from Moscow for the withdrawal of British unions, arguing for trade-union unity and a recognition of the continuous movement of labour between the two countries. T hough it was actually addressed to the question of Labour-communist unity, the title of one of Pollitt’s wartime pamphlets perfectly summed it up: Workers of Britain, Unite!

Workers of the world...

During the course of the early 1930s, a stream of recruits made its way into the CPGB from the Independent Labour Party and its ‘Revolu tional Policy Committee’ (RPC). Their precise motives varied. Some were impressed by the communists’ greater sense of mission and purpose, others by considerations of political efectiveness or the CPGB’s claim to what it insisted was a single revolutionary franchise. For many, though, what most distinguished communism was its quality of internationalism, not just in the abstract, but in the form of a revolution international and workers’ state ostensibly embodying its values. For Clive Branson, scion of an Anglo-Indian military family, these were the two factors that drew him to the CPGB in Chelsea. Robert Barnes, the son of an East London docker who joined the ILP even before going to Cambridge in 1929, was influenced both by Lenin’s Reply to the ILP and the Comintern’s notorious ‘twenty-one conditions’, which were at the centre of debates within the ILP as to its proper international relations. George Barnard was another ILPer reaching Cambridge from a working-class background, having been drawn to communism even as a Walthamstow grammar-school boy by the still unrevised slogan, Workers of the World, Unite! ‘In a way the appeal of the Communist Party was that you were a member of the Communist International’, he recalled. You weren’t just a member of the Communist Party, you paid your dues to the International... All three joined the CPGB in 1932.

Communist internationalism was expressed organisationally as well as ideologically, involving not only the imagined community of the world’s workers but the power structures of democratic centralism and a definite hierarchy of solidarities. T his in its turn came to mean the privileging of the particular state interests of the USSR, so that the highest form of this ‘proletarian’ internationalism also represented the clearest negation of genuine working-class mutuality. T his was never better demonstrated than at the start of the Second World War. In avoiding the trap of rallying to the flag, communists in Britain subordinated both nationalism and political calculation to the claims of internationalism, but did so at Stalin’s behest and using arguments predicated on the absolute priority of Soviet security. For Hobsbawm, this was heroic though mistaken: it was how socialists should have behaved in 1914, but did not. For political opponents, however, it was the final proof of the communists’ ‘slavish’ subservience to Moscow. The Labour Party in a wartime pamphlet described it as unsurpassed treachery to both class and nation.

For some historians, it has provided the single guiding motif in the CPGB’s history, defining and ultimately explaining everything else. In 1958 Henry Pelling concluded his account by asking ‘how it came to pass, that a band of British citizens could sacrifice themselves so completely over a period of almost forty years to the service of a dictatorship in another country, and could find it so difficult to adjust themselves to the revelation of the dictator’s all too human imperfections’. Though this
is certainly a central issue of communist historiography, actually answering Pelling’s question depends on the question itself being put rather differently. It is not just that most British communists did not ‘completely sacrifice’ themselves to Russia in any meaningful sense of the term, or that there were other things going on in their lives that must also help to explain their political commitments. More than that, the issues of internationalism and pro-Sovietism themselves need to be historicised, for over forty years and beyond, as the composition of Pelling’s ‘band’ continually changed, the interplay of national and international influences shaped the recruitment and party experiences of British communists in ways that generalised notions of ‘service’ do little to illuminate. If British communists did not primarily define themselves as ‘British citizens’, least of all in the Comintern period, by refusing the supremacy of the nation or the state they nevertheless exposed themselves to conflicts of loyalties differing widely in their form, intensity and often in their resolution. In 1956, three-quarters of them found it so difficult to adjust to Khrushchev’s revelations that they stayed in the communist party; the other quarter found it so difficult that they left. MacIarnmid, as we have seen, actually joined. Even without entering the polycentric world of post-1956, it is only by such a process of differentiation that the specificities of ‘service’ can be identified and their bearing upon wider party activities evaluated. The value of a prosopographical approach, once again, is that it entangles simple dichotomies with both the diversity and interconnectedness of communist lives.

By the same token, differentiation at a national comparative level suggests that Britain’s situation as a major imperialist power, at once politically central and geographically peripheral to the Comintern’s world-view, must have shaped the CPGB’s international relationships in distinctive ways. So too, for different reasons, did the CPGB’s relatively secure legal position and diminutive size. Legality mattered because lives spent mainly in Britain were largely spared the grim toll of Stalinism. Size was important both because the lack of cadres encouraged the specialised performance of international functions and because the accommodation of wider labour movement priorities, by which alone the CPGB achieved a modest measure of success, encouraged a focus on immediate domestic issues at the expense of those linking communists worldwide. It was symptomatic that when Pollitt looked for an image to conjure up the idea of revolutionary unreality or sectarianism, they were those of ‘Chinese Generals’ or ‘What is happening in Czechoslovakia’. ‘We...know most aspects of the international situation; but when the average worker wants to know anything about getting unemployed
resourses overstretched, the CPGB was apparently alone in the 1920s in resisting setting up an individual members’ section of the International Red Aid or MOPR, arguing in part that mass unemployment made it ‘very hard to raise money for helping persecuted comrades abroad’. Not surprisingly, the point was made in response that it was precisely in ‘draw[ing] the workers into the international working-class movement [and] break[ing] down the insular and imperialist psychology of the British working class’ that such an organisation had its rationale.185

As argument or fact, ‘insularity’ was reinforced by Britain’s physical and cultural peripherality to the Comintern. British trade unionists, like Chinese generals, might briefly dominate Comintern agendas, but in the years of the international’s effective functioning, the CPGB was marginalised by geography and language as well as size. Through its oversight from 1922 by the Comintern’s ‘Anglo-American-Colonial’ bureau, later the Anglo-American secretariat (AAS), the CPGB was implicitly defined as at best a semi-European party. Moreover, the Comintern’s use of English as effectively its fourth language produced no corresponding appetite in communists like Pollitt to learn any of the others. J.T. Murphy, one of the exceptions, did urge the wider study of German, but pending the improvement of the Comintern’s translation facilities during the course of the 1920s, pettish complaints were frequently made at the exclusion of British representatives from participation in discussions.186 Similarly, while the supply of the English editions of Inprecorr and The Communist International comfortably exceeded demand, other publications, including ‘the Great Comintern Year-book’, L’Annuaire du Travail, were obtainable only in French or German.187

In his attack on the CPGB as a ‘society of great friends’, the Comintern functionary Manuilsky partly had in mind this lack of any ‘organic connection’ with the problems of the international movement.188 Among British communists alert to this shortcoming, the former SLPer Tom Bell repeatedly criticised the persistence within the party of the ‘democratic mind’ and its failure to take seriously ‘international’ issues like the anti-Trotsky campaign.189 Partly Bell linked this with the CPGB’s ‘artisan’ composition, but he was equally conscious of its peripherality. Visiting Paris in the winter of 1923–4, he drew comparisons, not only with the PCF’s large Polish and Italian sections, but with the ‘continuous passing to and fro’ of comrades from all over Europe. ‘The Party’, he noted enviously, ‘pulses with Internationalism. The impression I have got is that we are most unfortunate in being cut off, in the manner we are, from this intermingling with us in our locals and presence at headquarters of foreign comrades.’190

This remained true almost until the Second World War. Not only was London not a major centre of Comintern operations, but the CPGB itself was not a priority for direct personal assistance. In Paris between the wars, quite apart from the presence of international functionaries like Willi Münzenberg and Julius Alpári, several Comintern workers took on significant party responsibilities. Among them were the Italian Giulio Ceretti, a member of the PCF’s central committee; the German Alfred Kurella, who ran its party schools; the Romanian Anna Pauker, who in 1931–2 took charge of its organisation; and the Czech Eugen Fried, whom many would regard as the leading figure in the PCF leadership. In Britain, by contrast, Comintern workers stayed for shorter periods, and came and went essentially as outsiders. With the KPD’s ascendancy during the Third Period, arrangements were made to provide its smaller sibling with systematic assistance, and Comintern representatives also played a key role in party congresses, as Walter Ulbricht did in November 1929.191 Nevertheless, in a comparative context one is reminded of Manuilsky’s complaint of international commitments having to be ‘forcibly injected’ into the British party. In 1927, the CPGB’s North West London local, covering some one-and-half million people, was addressed by a visiting Comintern worker. What makes his report unconsciously revealing is not only what it tells us about party discipline and the supposedly ‘atomising’ effects of its local organisation, but the decidedly low-key reception which the visitor was given. The ‘local’, he recorded stoically, had forty-five members, ‘very scattered’, and the meeting was timed for 7.30. ‘At 8.15 came the first, at 8.30 we could begin with 6 present. At 9 came another 4’—and that was it. If the stories are true of CPGB members being fined for unpunctuality, then this local at least will not have needed any Moscow gold.192

Probably the only figure at all comparable with Fried was the Ukrainian Petrovsky. Functioning from 1924 to 1926 as the Comintern’s representative in Britain, Petrovsky remained responsible for the CPB’s affairs until removed from the AAS in 1928. That protests from his British colleagues followed was testimony to the political understanding that had been established between them, and to the close personal relations which were cemented by Petrovsky’s marriage to Rose Cohen.193 Though the nature of her mandates is less clear, the Finnish-Estonian Salme Pekkala similarly had an important influence over the Bolshevisers of the early 1920s, while for twelve years her husband Palme Dutt was effectively a corresponding member of the CPGB’s central committee while attending to unspecified duties in Brussels. On the other hand, as Dutt became notorious for his attentiveness to the ‘international line’, his
physical remoteness only seemed to underline its externality, in formulation if not application. Bell himself had the standing of an international functionary, as the first ‘leader’ of the CI’s Anglo-American bureau, twice the CPGB’s representative in Moscow, a MOPR functionary and a section director at the Lenin School. He could not, however, have exercised such responsibilities by remaining in London, and was out of the country for almost the whole of the 1930s. ‘International’ in this sense usually meant somewhere else.

To some extent this was true even of the colonial responsibilities which fell to the CPGB. In this respect London was hardly peripheral, and as early as 1921 King Street was earmarked as the co-ordinating centre for anti-colonial activities, exploiting ‘Imperial means of exchange and communication... for the more speedy disruption of the Empire’. Still in 1923, however, when the CPGB was approached by the Comintern to convene a ‘negro’ conference, it suggested it be held in Paris ‘on geographical grounds’. When anti-colonial work did pick up during the 1920s, the credit belonged not so much to those formally charged with the responsibility, but to younger anti-imperialists, working very largely outside of the party’s formal structures and linking up directly with the AAS and Indian revolutionaries. The main practical responsibility for this work was shouldered by Clemens Dutt, Raji’s older brother, who, as well as maintaining contact with India, organised a network of ‘comrades and sympathisers’ within Britain, including a small seamen’s union and a monthly paper The Masses. He did not work directly through the CPGB, and in 1926 proposed the transfer of the handful of Indian student communists in Britain to the Indian party. When the Dutts’ co-worker and political intimate Hugo Rathbone took up work in the ECCI information department, dealing extensively with colonial issues, he too was reported to have ‘lost contact’ with the party. In 1928, complaints were made concerning Clemens’s unsolicited attendance at the Comintern’s Sixth World Congress, and both his ‘general attitude to the Party apparatus’ and the lack of accountability for his activities held as grievances against him.

During the ‘Third Period’, the profile of colonial issues rose, stimulated by the launching of a British section of the League Against Imperialism (LAI) and campaigning around the Meerut trial. Nevertheless, the over-specialisation of this work remained a complaint and in 1930 prompted allegations of ‘white chauvinism’, though on grounds of neglect rather than outright hostility. Four years later, Saklatvala complained of ‘adverse comments about Negroes and Asians’, again alleging the depreciation of colonial issues as ‘nobody’s business in particular’. ‘Many things happen among the coloured seamen in the East End of London’, Saklatvala wrote, ‘and members of the Party and of the unemployed workers’ movement, living right in the locality know nothing about it’. In 1931, even the head of the party’s colonial department, Percy Glading, was advised by Pollitt to concentrate on his industrial activities, with the unsurprising consequence that the department’s work was subsequently described as weak, of a ‘showy character’ and isolated from the rest of the party. Two years later, the responsibility was taken over by Ben Bradley, like Glading a metalworker, but a committed anti-colonial activist whose conversion to communism had come as a result of working for the British government in Rawalpindi in 1921–2. As a Meerut prisoner and successively the secretary of the LAI and CPGB’s colonial bureau, Bradley’s work over the next few years could not have been described as of a ‘showy character’. It did, however, remain the province of what Bradley himself called ‘a small group of people’ in and on the fringes of the party.

Where the combination of great-power location and political marginality most served to internationalise the experience of British communists was in respect of Soviet Russia. Given the sweeping use in this connection of concepts like service and slavishness, it is especially important to bring a degree of precision to discussions of the Russian dimension in British communist lives. Not only did the nature of this relationship change over time, but the process was a contradictory one irreducible to a linear Stalinisation thesis deriving from a German trajectory terminating in 1933. In the CPGB’s case, up to this period and what E.H. Carr called the ‘twilight of Comintern’, a dense pattern of association with the USSR can be traced in the core biographical areas of residence, travel, education and employment, as well as ideological commitment. Though these factors always have to be set against indigenous pressures, in an international context there was nothing to bear comparison with these interactions, either qualitatively or quantitatively. At the same time, these commitments were framed within a discourse of indivisible working-class internationalism within which the possibility of a conflict of interest between Soviet Russia and other legitimate working-class objectives could scarcely even be conceptualised. Rooted in Stalin’s ‘socialism in one country’, it was therefore only during the 1930s, with the embrace of national interests and the semantic differentiation of the workers of different countries, that there arose the possibility of abstracting from this internationalist equation a particular Soviet state interest. The shift was one of quite basic significance; for while on the one hand it allowed the explicit elevation of Soviet objectives which so-called proletarian
internationalism represented, it also allowed the theoretical possibility of a non-correspondence between these and other working-class interests. From ‘workers of the world’ to ‘workers of all countries’, the seeds of later divisions were already being sown. It is striking that, in Britain at least, communists of a pre-1933 vintage were to figure in the battles of 1956 almost entirely as party loyalists.

Although British communists made their way to Moscow from the early 1920s, it was only in the latter half of the decade that a significant presence there was established. One reason was the expansion of the Comintern apparatus and its absorption of technical as well as political workers. Another was the requirement for English-language workers in institutions like the Marx-Engels Institute and the Moscow Daily News. From 1926 there were also the annual British intakes into the Lenin School, reaching a peak in the early 1930s. By 1928, Bell was reporting ‘quite a colony’ of Britons in Moscow, and the CPGB’s numerical weakness meant that a significantly greater proportion of its activists were called upon for such activities—for example, providing a similar number of ILS students to the very much larger PCF.202

From the late 1920s, temporary residents were supplemented by innumerable visiting parties of comrades and fellow-travellers, whether on workers’ delegations or the new phenomenon of the Intourist package. Sometimes these initial contacts led to longer-term engagements with Soviet or Comintern institutions and in a few cases, like that of the ILS student Johnny Gibbons, a life which Gibbons himself described as one of ‘self-imposed exile’.203

Within Britain, relative neglect by the Comintern was offset by the significant presence established by the Soviet state. Drawn by Britain’s commercial and political standing, Soviet economic and diplomatic institutions provided employment for dozens if not hundreds of British communists between the wars. Regarded even as a ‘haven of the Party’, already in 1924 the institutions provided the CPGB’s largest ‘factory’ group, some forty-strong.204 The subsequent development of Russian Oil Products (ROP) provided many more positions and according to one former employee its appointments were subject to King Street’s approval.205 The extent to which Soviet employees were able to function in ordinary party activities seems to have fluctuated considerably with the vagaries of Anglo-Soviet relations. Complaints can be found of the wholesale dismissal of British communists from Arcos, the Russians’ most important trading organisation, and of the constraints to which the employees of other institutions were intermittently subjected.206 Andrew Rothstein, on the other hand, operated under a variety of party pseudonyms while deeply involved with the Soviet state, while employees of the Soviet embassy in some periods pursued their party activities quite openly.207 Some were even drawn into such activities precisely through their work for the Russians, like Violet Lansbury, the youngest daughter of the Labour politician, who came under Rothstein’s influence as a secretary at the Soviet delegation.208

Hundreds of British communists therefore had some direct or continuous experience of Comintern or Soviet institutions. Fateful, however, two forms of contact were less common. One was that of the political refugee. Although in the 1920s some activists from the former Russian empire were deported back there—Barry M Cloughlin has identified over twenty cases—neither their numbers nor their prominence within the party bore comparison with the sizeable émigré groups of Finns, Poles, Germans, Austrians and other European nationalities.209 Nor was any part of the CPGB leadership ever forced to operate from abroad, with consequences that were incalculable. Not only did the shadow of the purges for the most part fall only indirectly on the CPGB, but the party’s leading cadre was far less thoroughly internationalised than its continental counterparts. Moving between Moscow, France and Spain, the PCI leader Togliatti has been described as ‘more a European or an international Communist than an Italian’, while his counterpart Maurice Torez spent more than half of the period from 1940 to 1953 actually living in Moscow. Indeed, at the time of the Comintern’s dissolution in 1943, at least ten European communist parties had their foreign bureaux in Moscow.210 Pollitt also claimed to have visited the USSR more often than any other Briton, so little embarrassed by the fact that he possibly even exaggerated the number of visits.211 Nevertheless, from as early as 1924, when he and MacManus failed to take up their places on the Comintern presidium, he was frequently under pressure for not attending to his international commitments.212 Except for the single position of CPGB representative to the Comintern, held at various times by figures like Bell, Murphy and Campbell, the question of residence in Moscow did not really arise for the first tier of the British party’s leaders.

The other missing group was that of settlers or economic migrants. Again, a number of Jewish migrants did return to Russia in the early years of the revolution, but there was never any real British equivalent to the flow of American technicians who assisted in the first Five Year Plan. Those who went included communists of proven loyalty, like Gladys Cattermole, a worker in the Anglo-Soviet Shipping Company, and W.R. Stoker, a market gardener and former SLP activist who proposed assisting with the collectivisation of agriculture.213 However,
Soviet Russia was thus to vanquish pessimism and test the limits of willing credulity. Children liberated from shyness ran up in the streets, while Red Army detachments marched by singing revolutionary anthems, and factory canteens even in 1932 gave you ‘three courses to choose from’. For the ‘sincere believer in the People’s Cause’, it was ‘marvellous’, it gave you ‘fresh energy’, it was ‘absolutely it’ and the inspiration made your spirits rise. For the ‘sincere believer in the People’s Cause’, it was ‘marvellous’, it gave you ‘fresh energy’, it was ‘absolutely it’ and the inspiration made your spirits rise. 219 ‘I have been permanently optimistic since I came to the Soviet Union’, wrote the young mathematician David Guest, who in 1933 had been teaching in an Anglo-American school. ‘Whatever happens I shall never be the same as I was because now I know and understand what the future must be like.’220 Guest contrasted this ‘deep underlying feeling of confidence’ with the ‘hysteria and despair’ of capitalism. Randall Swingler thought of the ‘white and cheated faces’ pouring forth from British cinemas and he too described it as an antidote to ‘despair’ and his own sense of smallness and irresolution:

... be humbled and quickened,  
That already the lands live, where men  
Spread forth their life like an ordered and opening flower.  
There all we fight for, is already growing.  
So what your inner energy dreams is possible, too,  
The power creating both dream and act.  

For the working-class revolutionary, dream and act were combined in the ubiquitous iconography of workers’ power, the flags, the Internationale and the hammer and sickle, all producing the sensation of ‘proud triumph’ which Hutt perhaps had in mind. Tom Bell called it feeling ‘red’, and for him, as he described the ‘wrench’ of leaving Russian soil, the sense of a transferred patriotism was again explicit: ‘just such emotions as I imagined the one-time forced emigrants experienced as they left their native land to go into the world of the unknown’.222

Unconsciously, Bell’s memoirs also reveal how the sense of ‘feeling red’ was progressively transferred from a broader conception of internationalism to the Soviet state itself. Describing his earliest visits in the 1920s, the impression Bell conveyed was one of pulsating internationalism. ‘I had not realised how insular we were’, he wrote of his British comrades. ‘The babel of tongues; the characteristic types of peoples; the variety of manners and dress were overwhelming...’ By the mid-1930s, on the other hand, there were few indeed of these ‘cosmopolitan’ gatherings, and Bell...
himself witnessed the closing down of the international academy of the Lenin School. It was therefore appropriate that the emphasis in his memoirs should now have shifted to the proletarian might which Bell contrasted with his earlier memories of the revolution under siege. ‘See them now! Well clothed, in handsome uniforms...a match for the finest troops of the older capitalist armies’, he wrote of the new military panoply of May Day, whose aircraft manoeuvres doubtless drowned out revolutionary songs with ‘the powerful defensive forces of the proletarian government’.223 Eighty-one years old, Tom Mann described standing for six hours on end as they passed, his enthusiasm apparently undimmed.224

The images sit together in Bell’s memoirs, and from beginning to end these different motifs were always to some extent intermingled, qualifying, reinforcing or extenuating each other. Nevertheless, the changing character and status of the revolution was already clearly manifested in the tenth anniversary celebrations of 1927, with the shifting focus of the large British delegation from workers’ solidarity to the trumpeting of Soviet achievements. With the onset of economic crisis in the West, the boosting of the Russian plans became a major theme in communist propaganda with a new front organisation, the Friends of the Soviet Union (FSU), symbolising its more distinct significance. By 1929, the CPGB regarded materials about the Russian economic situation as ‘absolutely necessary’ for the party’s election campaign, and by the time of the revolution’s twentieth anniversary, Pollitt was gushingly describing Russia as ‘a lighthouse, whose warm rays sweep round the whole world’, achieving miracles ‘unparalleled in the long history of humanity’.225 Though embodied in Stalin and the history of the CPSU (B), as well as Red Army uniforms and the Moscow Metro, this identification with the distinct interests of Stalin’s regime was above all encapsulated, both for communists and their opponents, by the Moscow show trials of 1936–8.

As Martin Durham has shown, the repression of the Bolsheviks’ opponents had been justified by British communists since the earliest years of the revolution.226 In 1924, providing a sweeping alibi good for another thirty years, the CPGB urged ‘the simple elementary fact that in a Revolutionary State there can be nothing legal, but that which is in the interests of the revolution, and further that it is the body which is charged with the direction of the revolution that must be responsible for deciding what is and what is not legal’.227 Though some communists came to question the second proposition, few ever questioned the first. Some—like the John Cornford who savoured Aragon’s paean to the

‘violent domination’ and even ‘annihilation’ of class enemies—were apparently fascinated by it.228 Others, who were not, accepted its necessity. Following the Kirov murder in 1934, Pollitt complained at receiving only ‘a whole lot of things we know about the love and trust around Comrade Stalin’, when even workers sympathetic to Russia were demanding facts:

The workers don’t worry about counter-revolutionaries being shot, they want to know the actual concrete crimes they have committed, and why they did not get a public trial.... there is deep feeling amongst the workers on this. And it as as well for the comrades to know it.229

On the surface at least, the printed reports of the show trials provided no lack of detail as to the defendants’ alleged crimes, and Pollitt himself cast off what the CPGB’s returning Moscow representative called the ‘credulity kink’. The fundamental facts, he wrote in the aftermath of the trials, ‘give rise to the simple historical truth that whatever the policy of the Soviet Union it is always in the interests of its people and the working people of every other in the country in the world’.230 Whereas in a paradoxical way even the aim of a Soviet Britain had suggested the universality of the Soviet model, the indivisibility of internationalism was now expressed in terms of a Soviet way and purpose that was distinct, pre-eminent and beyond criticism. Jack Gaster was another ILP convert and the leader of a wholesale RPC defection in 1935, but in contrast to earlier recruits he saw the issue as one of unequivocal identification with ‘the Soviet Union and the CPSU’, to which his own reservations over Abyssinia and the League of Nations were consciously subordinated.231 Though Gaster allowed himself a last gesture of dissent against fascism. In the period of the Anglo-Soviet alliance, perhaps not surprisingly, the party recruits we looked at were nearly three times like-lier to single out this Soviet influence than the broader international struggle against fascism. One of them described it as being drawn to the party ‘as the Party of the Soviet Union, so to speak’, and amongst a mass of such literature the ‘basic socialist library’ recommended new members was dominated by Soviet items.232 When Douglas Springhall was convicted of spying in 1943, though he was expelled from the party, nobody, including Pollitt, suggested that spying for Russia was intrinsically to be deplored, and we have traced no evidence that this even registered as an issue with
any British communist. As Hobsbawm has put it, ‘the lines of loyalty... ran not between but across countries’, and there can have been few committed communists who would have seen any objection in principle to the passing of useful information to the Russians.

A focus on Russia alone, however, is misleading. Rather than simply being supplanted by Fatherland and Fuehrer, as Orwell suggested, internationalism remained an outstanding feature of communist politics, to some degree coexisting with the identification with the Soviet state where it had previously been centred upon it. In terms of their actual life experiences, contacts between British communists and the USSR were now of a far more abstract character. Whereas once Moscow had provided the hub of international communications, by the late 1930s even the Intourist route was increasingly closed off due to visa problems which naturally caused King Street acute embarrassment. Despite the great boost which the war gave to Soviet publicity efforts, Anglo-Russian contacts remained of a mainly official character, giving rise only to the further embarrassment of the ‘Soviet war brides’ denied permission to come to Britain. With the establishment of the post-war people’s democracies, superficially the cosmopolitanism of the early Comintern revived in a succession of well-attended youth and peace festivals. On the other hand, when Dennis Ogden was sent to Moscow as a translator in 1955, he discovered that he was almost the first to have made the journey from Britain since the war.

In the meantime, the reading, associations, travel movements and emotional world of British communists were shaped by a wider and almost polycentric form of popular-front internationalism. During the 1930s, in contrast with the war years, the number of recruits mentioning issues of international solidarity or international anti-fascism outnumbered by nearly five times the nineteen cases mentioning the USSR. For the years of the Spanish war, as communist politics became suffused with a new sense of internationalism, the ratio is fifteen to one. ‘I was waking up in the morning thinking in Spanish’, recalled one party recruit. Though coinciding with the Moscow trials, it is indicative of this wider internationalist commitment, along with the party’s more effective campaigning on domestic issues, that from this period one can date the first cases of individuals joining the party despite reservations about the USSR, or as a result of conscious attempts to overcome them. Oth...
in liberated Europe, and in a few cases liaised with armed resistance movements. James Klugmann, who as a major in Special Operations Executive will certainly have sought to influence British policy in favour of Tito, was one example. Frank Thompson, elder brother of Edward, was another, killed assisting Bulgarian partisans in June 1944.

Even where encountered through the party press or bookshops, there is no mistaking the distinctive quality of communist internationalism in this period. In the printed report of the 1937 party congress, no fraternal delegates are mentioned and all but one of the fraternal greetings are from English-speaking countries. At the first post-war party congress, by contrast, there were fifteen fraternal delegates, including ones from India, Ceylon, China and nine European countries. Interestingly, neither a message nor a delegate from the USSR was indicated. By 1947, a peak of forty-one fraternal delegates, assisted by the simultaneous convening of a conference of empire communist parties, again included no Russian. Like a fleeting moment between Comintern and Cominform, the sense of optimism is captured in two publications identified with Edward Thompson. The first was a collection of his brother's letters, conveying not only the idealised image of the USSR but the dream of a European fatherland based on a pan-European patriotism 'far transcending my love for England'. The second was Thompson's report of the building in 1947 of the Yugoslavian youth railway, which for a younger generation captured something of the idealism which for their elders was synonymous with Spain. Not Luxemburgians, but still genuine internationalists, the different national contingents assembled each morning for work under their national flags. Only the Soviet flag, it seems, was missing.

Nearly forty years later, Thompson evoked this 'new internationalism of common resistance' against the post-war logic of the blocs, bitterly recounting its subsequent betrayal by both East and West. Like the lines of loyalty, the lines of betrayal ran not between but across different countries, and can be traced cutting into the CPSB itself. By 1949, Stalin's Russia had regained a sort of absolute ascendancy in communist conceptions of internationalism, and at that year's CPSB congress the CPSB's fraternal message was given pride of place, second only to the fulsome birthday tribute paid to Stalin himself. Yugoslavia, now excommunicated from the Cominform, was present only in the form of a vicious denunciation of the 'Tito clique', shortly to be elaborated in Kugmann's mendacious commentary From Trotsky to Tito. If that was Kugmann's personal test of faith, other British communists were confronted with the targeting of communists with British connections in the new wave of persecutions enveloping the people's democracies.

In East Germany, where these elements were 'contemptuously referred to as the Londoners and regarded with great suspicion', there were at least no show trials. In Hungary, Edith Bone, who had had a long-standing if interrupted membership of the CPGB, was imprisoned when she returned with the Daily Worker's credentials and not released until 1956. In Czechoslovakia too, London-based communists like Paul Eisler came under a cloud, and the infamous Slsansky trial of 1952 featured defendants who had spent the war years in Britain and had their association with figures like the Daily Worker's Claud Cockburn brought up against them. Otto Sling, whom Pollitt among others had known well, was one of the victims. His British wife, Marian St Kongová, who had returned with him to Czechoslovakia, suffered two-and-a-half years of brutal imprisonment.

This was not the first time such issues had arisen. As early as 1923, a London YCLer working for the Young Communist International had been shot as a spy by those 'charged with the direction of the revolution'. Barry McLoughlin has so far documented a handful of other British Gulag victims, and more must remain to be discovered. A relatively well-known case is that of the seaman and former Invergordon Mutineer, Len Wincott, whom Pollitt had approved for work in Russia in 1934 and who was sent to the Gulag in 1948. Undoubtedly, most disturbing from the CPGB's perspective was the disappearance of Petrovsky and Rose Cohen, who were separately charged with spying in 1937. Cohen was particularly well known in London left-wing circles and on intimate terms with Pollitt, who in the early 1920s had several times proposed marriage to her. Arrested on the very day that Pollitt arrived in Moscow with a British delegation in August 1937, she was shot three months later. She was rehabilitated in 1958.

Pollitt appears to have made strong representations to the Comintern over Cohen. He had certainly made clear his disbelief in the charges against Petrovsky, possibly pondering later that this may have done little to assist Cohen herself. We now know that Pollitt was sketched in for a possible Comintern show trial, and throughout the late 1930s there is detectable a critical edge in some of his exchanges with or concerning the Russians, exemplified by his complaint of the 'disappearance of internationalism' from Soviet pronouncements at the beginning of the war. As early as 1934 he had protested at Soviet participation in the Hendon air show, having himself helped organise the campaign against the event from his nearby home. 'We have been fighting like hell against this Air War display, and two days later, it is announced with a flourish of trumpets in the entire capitalist press, that Airmen from the Soviet Union are
indeed most, opposed the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. A few, like Marian Šlingová, became actively involved with other socialists in campaigning against oppression in Eastern Europe. Younger recruits might now join the party feeling from the start a positive ‘loathing’ for the USSR. On the other hand, there not only remained an older cohort of pro-Soviet fundamentalists, but as late as the 1970s they were joined by younger converts to the same vision, returning from Honecker’s GDR to join the party almost as they might have from Stalin’s Russia.

Even after 1989, some older communists never really came to terms with the realities of communist rule. One recalled the ‘beautiful magazines’ about Russia her father brought home in the 1930s, and nothing in the end was capable of supplanting the image. Another interviewee, from a party household, was more critical: she took in what was known of Stalin’s Russia, and grasped it intellectually, but one part of her never stopped wondering whether Stalin could really have committed the crimes alleged against him. ‘That I suppose is sad in a way. But what can I do about it? I find it very difficult to read books by the Gulag people, about what they suffered. I find it very difficult.’ A number of interviewees described their identification with the USSR as religious in character, and this was sometimes true in an almost essentialist way. For some of them, the image they carried of Stalin’s Russia was impossible to disentangle from their own identities as communists and human beings, and from what even the most terrible revelation could stop them regarding as the fullest and most worthwhile part of their lives.

Whether it was the Soviet war effort, or the psychological impact of finally putting the need for party discipline above issues like the war and Cohen’s arrest, Pollitt never again questioned Soviet policy in this way. Although retaining some sense of the CPGB’s legitimate expectations in its own sphere, a note of definite cynicism entered into his views of East European communism and he made it clear in private that he had no belief in the charges made in the Slansky trial, but that nothing was to be done about them. Dorothy Diamond, on the other hand, reported complacently that she had known two of the ‘traitors’ by sight and ‘never even liked them as persons (e.g. Schling).’ Whatever the reaction, for communists with any sort of contact with such affairs, such as journalists at the Daily Worker, it was by this time almost an open secret that something amiss was happening in Eastern Europe.

It was no accident that the popular-front generation was so prominent in the disputes of 1956. Eric Hobsbawm has attributed his remaining in the party, while so many associates left, to his having come to communism as one of ‘the tail-end of the first generation of communists... for whom the October Revolution was the central point of reference in the political universe.’ Communism for these was indivisible, or at least could not finally be imagined without its Soviet lodestar. Among those who left the party, on the other hand, many retained the hope or expectation that it might be possible to extricate the workers of other lands from what now seemed the nightmare of Stalinism. Though some resignations occurred immediately that Khrushchev’s disclosures were published, far more were driven out by King Street’s failure to take this more independent stance over the suppression of the Hungarian revolt in November 1956. Even then, many left reluctantly, and the distinctive imprint of communism, and communist internationalism, remained evident in their political activities for years to come. In a paradoxical fashion which Thompson himself did not fail to recognise, as a peace campaigner and critic of Eastern European Stalinism, Thompson was never more at one with the ‘Stalinist’ he had been in the 1940s than in campaigning for European disarmament and the dissolution of the Soviet bloc.

For those who remained within the party, the old lines of loyalty now ran through communism itself. Always there remained a powerful sense of belonging to a world movement, but increasingly it gave out conflicting signals, generating factionalism rather than party unity. Some were drawn to Italian communism as a new international exemplar. Many,
CHAPTER 6
TRAJECTORIES AND COLLISIONS

Born out of the Russian Revolution, the communist party in Britain was to perish with it. In November 1991, three months after the failed August coup and nemesis of Soviet communism, the CPGB ‘in transformation’ held its forty-first and final congress. Amid a last flurry of media coverage, venerable figures like Rose Kerrigan were sought out who had lived through and seemingly personified the party’s vicissitudes. Approximating to the biblical span of three score and ten, it is not surprising that the history of this movement should have been imagined in anthropomorphic terms, as a course of youth, maturity and decay. In his ‘social anthropological’ survey of Italian communism, published in 1990, Cris Shore invoked the seven ages of man to capture the several stages of the PCI’s evolution, and colloquially such devices had always had a wide currency. ‘Our fault is undoubtedly our youth!’ Tom Bell wrote to Lenin at the CPGB’s formation, and as the party entered its third decade in 1940, William Gallacher described it as having ‘battled its way to lusty manhood’. Whatever qualities were ascribed the CPGB as it ‘transformed’ itself into the Democratic Left, youth and lusty manhood were not among them. As the most recent party history points out, one of the last redoubts of communist activism, surviving the demise of the CPGB itself, was the pensioners’ movement.

On the other hand, the life-cycle metaphor is no more than a metaphor. Shore’s method was to identify distinct generational cohorts within the PCI, entering it in clearly demarcated periods and thereafter coexisting in what was often a state of tension. Karl Mannheim, in his classic essay on generations, cited the art historian Pinder to describe this as ‘the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous’, so that the same events are experienced as different stages in the lives of different generational cohorts. In a convulsive history like the PCI’s, marked by periods of illegality, armed struggle, government office and constitutional opposition, the boundaries between Shore’s seven ages, though living on contemporaneously within the party, are more than usually clearly delineated. In Britain, superficially, there were no such dramatic transitions. Even so, in the CPGB’s early decades, violent shifts in Comintern strategy artificially simulated transitions from consensus-building to sectarianism, sometimes in the space of barely months. Moreover, the Comintern itself made concerted efforts to mould a new generation of cadres in its own image, and for a significant minority of them this meant their uprooting for periods of work or study in Moscow.

More broadly speaking, the whole inter-war period was marked off by the high incidence of imprisonment, victimisation, personal upheaval and a series of dramatic confrontations with the forces of authority. With communists marching under ‘policemen’s batons’, ‘opening up the Pennine Way’ or ‘scaling the heights of the Cutteslowe walls’, for Raphael Samuel and many others this was the party’s heroic age. For several hundred of its members it had its culmination on the battlefields of Spain, where over 160 of them died. However, even at this early stage, some members felt that the mobilising ideal of revolution was losing its significance for those drawn to communism by anti-fascism and the popular front. Later recruits, arriving in the easier political circumstances of the Anglo-Soviet alliance, were sometimes referred to dismissively as ‘wartime’ or ‘Red Army’ communists. Though they often led anywhere but the communist party, the cultural and educational experiences of the 1960s and 1970s also gave rise to a distinct cohort which Mike Waite has described as ‘the second of the two “political generations” which shaped the history of British Communism’. Whether linked with feminism, the ‘trainee organic intellectuals’ of the universities, or the challenge to the party’s prevailing conceptions of leadership, the divisions of the party’s final decades, like those of its earliest ones, were in every respect overlain with those of generation.

Arguably no concept is therefore more important in making sense of the attitudes and alignments of Britain’s communists. Coexisting within the same organisational framework, the two, seven or indeterminate number of non-contemporaneous ages of British communism lived the experience of the total institution in different ways, sometimes clashing, usually accommodating each other and periodically driving each other out. Probably no significant fissure in the party’s history was not in part a question of generational differences, whether explicitly articulated or revealed in shifting languages and priorities acquired at different moments of political engagement. At the same time, the meaning of generation, more even perhaps than class, gender or ethnicity, was malleable, ambiguous and contingent. Though apparently measurable
with precision, like the age limits set for the Lenin School or YCL, youth and experience were also normative concepts, providing politicised vocabularies often at the expense of descriptive accuracy. Viewing generation as a relationship rather than one of Mannheim’s ‘generation-units’, the existence of multiple sites of inter-generational contact meant that copybook patterns of reversal and transmission often coexisted, albeit in a wide variety of combinations.

Constructions of generation thus depended not only on encompassing social movements or events encountered simultaneously, but on influences of work, education, home and immediate social environment. These differed widely both in their receptiveness to communism and their prevailing inter-generational relationships. One distinction emerging from our research is that between practices of seniority and mentorship characteristic of the craft-based occupational cultures that shaped the British Labour movement, and challenges to these ties on grounds of rank-and-file accountability, the greater revolutionary potential of excluded groups or the superior moulding processes of an ‘education’, be it traditional or revolutionary. Moreover, because these varying constructions of generation were closely bound up with the relations of communism to other political movements, particularly social democracy, they also have to be traced through a series of shifting political contexts.

Here we can only summarise them. Very crudely speaking, in its heyday British communism provided an effective vehicle of a generationally defined politics expressed through and by identification with the party’s established structures and leadership. Here, generation as a line of cleavage was one essentially separating the communist from the non-communist, while unity of the party itself was underpinned by a high degree of inter-generational cohesion. In the 1920s, on the other hand, and still more in the 1960s and 1970s, acute generational conflict existed within the party. In the earlier period, the cleavage this expressed was that of the Bolshevik revolution and ‘Leninism’, giving rise to what the German communist Alfred Kurella called a ‘Leninist generation’ uncontaminated by past legacies. If generational tensions flared up again from the 1960s, this was partly a sign of the exhaustion and discrediting of that same Leninist generation, which had dominated much of European communism in the meantime. At his last party congress in 1969, Dutt is recalled defending the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia as if in ‘sepulchral tones from beyond the grave’. By this time Dutt was becoming marginalised even within the communist party, but the divisions which such issues opened up only underlined the difficulties the party would face in extricating itself from a legacy so central to its political identity. To the young Dutts of the time, it was the communist party itself which seemed a presence from beyond the grave.

Youth cultures

Whatever may have been the case elsewhere, the CPGB on its formation was not conspicuously a party of young people. ‘It will be of no use…to call this…a collection of hot-headed, irresponsible youths’, an executive member wrote of its founding congress; ‘there was a very considerable number of middle-aged men and women delegates’. The writer, A.A. Watts, was not so much middle-aged as a self-designated ‘old crock’: now aged fifty-nine, a sometime executive member of the London Society of Compositors and the SDF, representative of the latter on the first Labour Representation Committee, and one of those accredited with introducing George Lansbury to Marxism. Like Dora Monteﬁore, Eden Paul, A.A. Purcell, George Ebury, E.B. Reeves and, most famously, Tom Mann, Watts represented a small but significant layer of late Victorian socialists for whom adhesion to Bolshevism represented only the latest in a succession of radical attachments. As well as more conventional labour-movement trajectories, these might include temperance, vegetarianism, eugenics, socialist feminism or, in Reeves’s case, an active role in the Burston school strike. Joining them was the larger middle-aged group to which Watts referred: the would-be gravediggers of George D angerﬁeld’s Liberal England, politicised by industrial conﬂict and in some cases the women’s suﬀrage movement. Old or middle-aged, many joined without fully comprehending the epochal character of the new alignment. Some continued to adopt the outlook of the militant trade unionist, including several who dropped out or were expelled. As well as Purcell, a Furnishing Trades’ organiser, these included Robert Williams of the Transport Workers and A.J. Cook, future general secretary of the MFGB. Watts himself, though remaining a party member until his death in 1928, struggled to assimilate the idea of Soviets to his twenty years’ experience of local government, describing them as ‘entirely new organs of public service’ to cover libraries, sewers, tramways and the whole litany of Fabian-style municipal socialism. Like other European communist parties, the early CPGB was like a junction or interchange between older socialist traditions and the new, impatient credo of communism.

In the course of the Bolshevising 1920s, this led to acute inter-generational conﬂicts in which ‘youth’, like class, functioned as a legitimising device. Among Watts’s middle-aged men and women, a general falling away can be observed. Early lists of congress delegates and branch
secretaries include many names leaving little trace in the party’s later history. Where we have further information, significant patterns emerge. At local level, while nine of the twenty-three foundation or near-foundation branch secretaries for whom we have the relevant details were aged over thirty-five, almost none of those undertaking this responsibility in the decade after 1922 were. At the same time, at the more visible level of the national party apparatus, a distinct leading group was now established comprising relative veterans whose experiences and responsibilities predated the party’s formation. Even incluing the YCL secretary William Rust, the average age of the communist leaders gauged for sedition in 1925 was thirty-five—a little short of the average of the executive as a whole. Five of the twelve were born within a two-and-a-half year period around 1890, with a smaller sub-group of Bell, Gallacher and Inkpin in their early forties. Politically this was of some significance, for at the leadership level the CPGB until 1929 retained much of its character as a coming together of the older marxist sects, and its predominantly working-class composition meant that proletarianisation did not of itself lead, as elsewhere, to a removal of the party old guard. This had to wait until Class Against Class, when a major overhaul of the party’s central committee was carried out ‘under the direct assistance and leadership of the representatives of the ECCI’ at the Eleventh CPGB Congress in November 1929. If the Comintern’s intervention was at this point decisive, it nevertheless represented the exploitation of generational tensions which had already precipitated the CPGB’s first leadership crisis as early as 1923.

At the heart of this first conflict was a group predominantly comprising intellectuals who had arrived at communism through guild socialism and remained entrenched in its main political nesting ground, the Labour Research Department. Their senior figure was the LRD’s secretary Robin Page Arnot, a contemporary and close associate of G.D.H. Cole who had joined the Fabians as a Glasgow student back in 1908. Born within a year of Arnot in 1890 were A.L. Bacharach, who like Cole had attended St Paul’s School, Westminster, and Mary Moorhouse, who later worked closely with Dutt. However, most of the rebels were still in their twenties, and within the CPGB their influence was above all associated with Dutt himself, born in 1896 and coming to marxism under the immediate influence of imperialist war and the October Revolution. In 1922–3, Dutt forged a close partnership with Pollitt, with whom he drafted the seminal ‘Bolshevik’ organisational report, whose implementation was then overseen by a committee which included Arnot. Making the case for ‘a complete revolutionary break with the old Socialist traditions of ineffectiveness in this country’, the identification of these traditions with their founding leadership set the ‘old’ against the ‘new’ at every level of the party. Sam Elsbury, a former ILP councillor and a socialist activist since the 1890s, expressed his dismay at the ‘lack of comradeship’ within the party, assisted by younger members who were ‘too fond of quoting the statutes and theses’. Though he briefly rejoined before making a final exit in 1929, Elsbury was another of the veterans who left the CPGB around this time. In St Pancras, where there were a number of such sceptics, Dutt referred to them as ‘specially cantankerous old ’uns’. Amid debilitating rivalries, the Bolshevisers’ campaign to overturn the older leadership came to a head at a special British commission of the Comintern held in June-July 1923. The line of division was unambiguously between ‘old-stagers’ and ‘new forces’. Throughout the country you have…old-timers who have been 10, 15, or 20 years in the movement, Dutt observed with a Bolshevik sense of tact. ‘They are often very good comrades, but useless for our purpose.’ Whether or not his Oxford first also encouraged such attitudes, references to the rebels as ‘freshers’ perfectly symbolised the intermingling of class and generation in a contest synchronising with the promotion within the Labour Party of brilliant young graduates at the expense of elderly union officials. Probably this as much as the rebels’ inexperience persuaded the Comintern to stand by the old-stagers, who at least measured up to the class requirements of Bolshevisation. By 1925, Dutt was living in Brussels, Pollitt was reconciled to heading the Minority Movement and Arnot had been exempted from party responsibilities to write the official history of the M iners’ Federation. It was not until the emergence of Class Against Class that they again saw their opportunity.

By this time Pollitt and even Dutt were themselves beginning to be outflanked by a younger cohort still less compromised by the past. In 1923, the oldest of the old guard, forty-six-year-old Bob Stewart, accused them of writing off their elders ‘merely because you were not born in the Communist Party’. Pollitt himself, however, was not only ‘born’ into this older movement but was to base his whole political persona on the fact. Even Dutt was mischievously reminded by Stewart of his membership of the National Guilds League. It was therefore only with the ‘Leninist generation’ of the 1920s that a cohort emerged which, politically speaking, really was born in the CPGB, and which in many cases died in it as well. Unlike the LRD ‘nucleus’, this was an aggressively proletarian cadre, in whom experiences of post-war unemployment and industrial strife combined with Bolshevik self-assurance to produce a combative,
overbearing and even thuggish spirit. ‘H e l l with the lid off’, the older Fife communist David Proudfoot wrote approvingly of YCL meetings in 1926. ‘Youngsters of 16 or 17 shaking fists in opponents’ faces and stating their case very well.’ 22 Even Gallacher in a generous moment described them as ‘splendid young proletarians… free from all the bad traditions of the early Socialist movement’.

Founded in 1921, the YCL at first had a strong taint of bohemianism but in 1923 there emerged at its head a brash and notably undeferential leadership exemplified by the three Londoners, then barely in their twenties, William Rust, Dave Springhall and Wally Tapsell. 24 Typically politicised only since the Russian Revolution, they espoused a tough, uncompromising and demonstrative form of politics, with special responsibilities for anti-militarist work and an enthusiasm for Bolshevik organisational forms not usually shared by older communists. Charged with surveying the party’s factory groups in 1925, another London YCLer, Douglas Wilson, discounted objections to such work as ‘derivate from the atmosphere of old associates and hangers on of the Party particularly people who have been connected with the movement verbally for years’. 25 In Glasgow, resistance to Ernie Woolley’s efforts in the same connection were similarly attributed to ‘lack of support from the old members of the Party’. 26 Woolley had been another prominent YCLer and later described himself as ‘persistently fighting against remnants of Social Democracy in our Party’, including the ‘violent opposition’ he alleged there had been to the formation of the YCL itself. 27 Though anti-Labour sentiments had been strongly expressed at the party’s foundation, it is among these younger cohorts that one is likeliest to find premonitions of the leftist line of ‘independent leadership’ which the Comintern imposed at the end of the decade. Already in 1924, Arnot asked rhetorically how long the party could go on denouncing the ‘false friends of the working class’ and ‘naturally it was Rust who leapt in to remonstrate with the Comintern’. 23

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In the few areas in which it then had a presence, the YCL itself provided a focus for inter-generational conflict. In Manchester, Woolley as its organiser became involved in a rancorous dispute over the running of the Communist Sunday School based at the Margaret Street Socialist Hall in Openshaw. 30 Vividly recalled in Pollitt’s memoirs, the hall was like a symbol of older socialist traditions, built and maintained as a ‘labour of love’ by a membership of skilled craft workers and harbouring a vigorous BSP version of the family party. Run by ex-BSPer Willie Greenhalgh and his daughter Sarah, a former art student, the Sunday school thus continued to feature secular hymns and moral parables, gathering under a banner of Sarah’s depicting the International in the style of an illuminated manuscript.

Where the Greenhalghs continued these BSP traditions, Woolley rejected their ‘paternalist attitudes in favour of revolutionary ‘self-activity’ in the schools. He further aroused antagonism by his attitude to the district party organiser, a forty-year old coach painter and ‘very gentle person’ called Jim Crossley, who used to play the violin on party rambles. Another possible source of tension was the predominantly Jewish composition of the YCLers, for old Willie Greenhalgh was recalled by one of them, David Ainley, as having become ‘obsessed against the Jews’. Whatever the explanation, older BSPers like the Greenhalghs left the party, while Crossley was ousted as organiser and went on party work to Egypt. In Manchester, possibly an extreme case, the party’s foundation cohort was thus largely driven out or marginalised in the course of Bolshevisation. Pollitt, who likened Crossley to an older brother, later reflected bitterly on the loss through ‘neglect and stupidity’ of the socialist hall in which so much of his own youth had been spent. Certainly, no such premises were built by the street and factory cells of the early communist party. The irony was that organisational measures largely promoted by Pollitt had helped drive out the older comrades whose idealism he evoked so feelingly.

Another figure who was edged aside was T.A. Jackson, a contemporarist of Elsbury’s born in 1879, and altogether the most impish, erudite and ill-washed of the socialist autodidacts to make their way into the CPGB. As the editor of the Communist, it was Jackson who made way for Dutt when it was replaced by the Workers’ Weekly in 1923. Re-entering the party’s employment the following year, like that other bookish misfit Charlie Ashleigh, he found a congenial role for a time at the Sunday Worker. However, after 1929, the year that the paper ceased publication, Jackson played no significant role in the party leadership. His feelings regarding his successors were hardly disguised. Already in 1924 he not only poured scorn on the party’s reorganisation, but when Rust for the YCL criticised the party’s lack of factory groups, accused him of ‘gross impudence… to come forward in this cheapjack fashion… a piece of impertinence on the part of the Young Communist League’. 21 Then in 1929 he denounced the process of “Inprecorisation” by which ‘an unintelligible “Babylonish dialect” [was] used sacramentally as evidence of righteousness’. Naturally it was Rust who leapt in to remonstrate with
him, and Jackson subsequently likened Rust himself to a copy of the impenetrable Inprecor ‘coming to life and reciting its own contents’. Recalling the period many years later, Jackson assumed a ghoulish countenance as he pronounced deliberately and with feeling: ‘The YCL needs to be damped down, battered down and beaten down.’ His deeper feelings for Dutt found expression in his pissing every morning on the garden shrub that he had given that name.

The issue was not merely one of political style. As Samuel pointed out, the special codes of Marxism-Leninism marked communism out from older and social and political formations, while at the same time distinguishing the orthodox and the initiated within the party. Sometimes deliberately, sometimes not, the use of the vernacular and a different set of cultural reference points thus served to limit or contest the hieratic order of ‘Leninism’, while at the same time the inculcation of a regard for ‘theory’ helped to underpin it. Collectively this was exemplified by the Lenin School, teaching just such a curriculum as the mark of leadership, and with such effect that some of its products were described as coming back speaking a different language. Though not attending the school himself, the inprecorising Rust epitomised the challenge of this younger leadership cohort. Aged just fourteen at the time of the Russian Revolution, he joined the CPGB almost at its foundation after a brief stint as a student and Pollitt’s ‘crown prince’. Replacing Gollan as assistant party member, J.R. Campbell, born 1894. The new assistant editor was the Clydeside foundation member J.R. Campbell, born 1894. The new assistant editor was John Gollan: born in 1911, YCL leader before the war, not an ILS student and Pollitt’s ‘crown prince’. Replacing Gollan as assistant party

expensive of older functionaries. At the end of 1931 Rust was joined in Britain by his second wife, the Russian Tamara Kravetz, while O’Shaughnessy in Moscow upheld the new line so vigorously that she was temporarily expelled from the Komsomol on a charge of ‘leftism’. She too remarried, and presumably her husband’s arrest was the cause of her return to Britain, volubly defending the purges, in 1937. She left behind a daughter by Rust, now aged twelve, who was caught up in the deportation of the Volga Germans before being reunited with her mother during the war. Remaining a party member, despite what she frankly described as the ‘murder’ and subsequent rehabilitation of her husband, Kathleen Rust, now Kath Taylor, was forthright in condemning the ‘cowards’ who fell away in 1956.

This was the generation meant to take over the direction of the communist movement, and in some instances, like that of the so-called ‘Thores cadre’ in the PCF, to some extent it did so. In Britain, however, its long-term impact is more debatable. Rust himself remained one of the party’s foremost leaders until his premature death in 1949, as did Springhall until his arrest for spying in 1943. Until that date, returning ILS students frequently found their way onto the party’s central committee, providing a peak figure of ten of its thirty members in 1932–5 and, for a time, the majority of its district organisers. Nevertheless, what was ultimately more striking was the longevity of an older leadership cohort, personified by Pollitt, and the patronage by which already in the late 1930s Pollitt’s preferment increasingly fell to those who had not attended the Lenin School and in many cases were too young to have done so.

Noting the contrast in this regard between the British and Irish communist parties, Barry McLoughlin speculates that the returning students must have appeared to older leaders like a trojan horse being sent into the party citadel. The speculation is plausible, and with Pollitt’s increasing control over party appointments, the only ILS alumni to retain significant positions at a national level were the proven Pollitt loyalists, Peter Kerrigan and Marian Jessop. Moreover, with the replacement in the late 1940s of a ‘pre-ILS’ generation, born before 1900 and politically from a ‘post-ILS’ cohort born after 1910, exactly as if the party were skipping a generation. Adjustments made on Rust’s death illustrate the point perfectly. Replacing Rust at the Daily Worker was the Clydeside foundation member J.R. Campbell, born 1894. The new assistant editor was John Gollan: born in 1911, YCL leader before the war, not an ILS student and Pollitt’s ‘crown prince’. Replacing Gollan as assistant party
secretary was George Matthews, born in 1917, the son of a Bedfordshire farmer and a student party recruit from 1938. Meanwhile, Allen Hutt, born 1901, had not only attended the ILS but was the CPGB’s most experienced journalist, having done more than anybody to create the ‘new’ professional Daily Worker of the 1940s. Passed over even for the assistant editorship, Hutt was consumed by ‘bitter disappointment and humiliation’ and wrote but did not send a letter of resignation to the paper.46 If the Lenin students represented what McLoughlin calls a ‘long-term investment’ by the Comintern, their restriction to secondary positions within the party apparatus suggests a definite depreciation of that investment.47

The attenuation of inter-generational conflict within the communist party does not mean that generation lost its saliency as a factor in the making of British communists. On the contrary, in no period more than the 1930s was recruitment so much shaped by the simultaneous impact upon the young of national and international influences like fascism, slump and the threat of war. Campaigning with the communist-leaning Labour League of Youth (LLY) and a range of non-socialist youth and student organisations, the sense of a common generational experience was above all identified with the war in Spain. Personifying it was John Cornford: communist and poet, with Byronic good looks and fierce political commitment, who died defending M adrid at the age of twenty-one and left behind one of the most beautiful love poems, to his girlfriend M argot H einemann. M emorialised in a volume detailing every aspect of his short life, Cornford was not only the ‘martyr of mythic power’ recalled by Denis Healey, but a symbol of and for his generation, explicitly projected as such.48

Profound as was this sense of forming ‘a younger generation’— the title which M argot K ettle gave her collection of oral reminiscences of the period—the terms of its relations with its elders were different from a decade previously. Partly this was to do with the cult of class and masculinity attaching to the party’s foremost leaders. Nobody in the 1930s referred to Pollitt or Gallacher as crocks, but Pollitt in particular exuded a gruff paternal authority which middle-class recruits in particular could find irresistible and which could also include a sexual element. M eeting him for the first time following Cornford’s death, H einemann later cited Gorki’s comments on T olstoi: ‘While this man lives I am not an orphan on the earth.’49 Sam Russell, who fought in the defence of M adrid, also regarded Pollitt as ‘father figure’, while even Stephen Spender found ‘something paternal in his friendly twinkling manner’ as Pollitt soft-soaped him into joining the CPGB in February 1937.50

Unlike their immediate predecessors, the ‘1930s’ generation provided no real challenge to the existing party leadership. Despite the continuing accession of younger recruits, the average age of the party’s central committee increased, from around thirty-four in 1932 to a pre-war high of forty-one in 1937, and while the most important newcomer was the forty-six-year-old E mili Burns, who had first joined the CPGB from the ILP in 1921. Even as younger leaders like G ollan and M attews began to emerge, they never imagined themselves as Pollitt’s rivals, while the YCL took up no political position distinguishable from the adult party until well into the 1950s. Coinciding with the maturation of its older leadership cohorts, the Stalinist cult of authority produced a respect sometimes bordering on deference. In 1958, the newly appointed Scottish party secretary, G ordon M cL ennan, was ‘astounded’ to be asked to comment on a draft speech of the miners’ official, A be M offat. M offat, he said, had ‘a fund of experience and leadership and struggle’ dating from between the wars. ‘I grew up appreciating and thinking of these people, and then for me as the Scottish secretary, and I was only thirty-one I think…and A be, who had been through all this, sending me his speech for my comments!’ Here generation reinforced the standing of the communist industrial militant, cutting through the power relationships conventionally identified with democratic centralism. To M cL ennan, later the CPGB’s general secretary, M offat too was like a ‘kind of second father’.51

By the late 1930s, relations were generally harmonious at every level of the party. When M ike W aite asked former YCLers to describe the tensions and difficulties they experienced with older party members, all but one of the twenty responses we examined relating to the 1930s described these relations as cordial and supportive.52 Beyond the party, the acceptance of established labour movement institutions also militated against the opening up of cleavages on generational lines. During the apprentices’ strikes of 1937, the decade’s biggest industrial youth action, demands were couched not as a rejection of labour institutions, as they might have been half a decade earlier, but as the right to be represented by them and have their status as skilled workers in the making recognised. If they thus received the support of the ‘adult’ movement, strikers on the Clyde also refused to link up with young women workers on the grounds that these were ‘not apprentices but only learners’.53 ‘It is this spirit of unity born in struggle’, the YCL affirmed with unconscious irony, ‘which has been handed down to them by their fathers, famous for their working-class traditions’.54 A more adversarial conception of generation did continue to be asserted against labour movement elders, and at both national and
local level the very noticeable contrast between the relations of the YCL and Labour League of Youth with their adult counterparts was assisted by the communist sympathies or allegiances of much of the LLY’s membership.55 Within the communist movement itself, however, it was to be the proud boast of the post-1956 party secretary John Gollan that he had never had to discipline the YCL.56

Infantile disorders

Given that communism was defined not in generational terms but political ones, it is not surprising that its constructions of youth and age fluctuated according to political context. For the individual communist, generalised revolt was often combined with a close sense of identity with one’s own parents, or else conflict with domestic or community elders offset by an identification with alternative role models. While assisting in the formation of partisan allegiances, these generational identities were then themselves moulded in the shape of party loyalties, so that generation was capable of underpinning as well as undermining party cohesion, and helped define the lines of party cleavage. Not songs but slogans of innocence and experience, these conflicting usages convey something of the shifting self-perception of the collectivity of British communists.

In its earliest years, the CPGB presented itself as a ‘young’ party in relation both to the Russians and to its Labour rivals, but with different connotations in each case. Though the Tom Bell who confounded the CPGB’s youth was only twelve years Lenin’s junior, an epoch of revolutionary experience seemed to separate them and he noted with appropriate humility: ‘But we are learning... from the International movement’.57 In a similar vein, a group of British leading communists, aged on average a little over forty, addressed the Russian leader as ‘one, whose experiences and responsibilities have fitted him to converse freely upon International Politics and whose knowledge of Social Science enables him to so thoroughly understand the dynamics of social progress’.58 Lenin himself hardly discouraged such attitudes. In his famous polemic Left-Wing Communism, subtitled ‘an infantile disorder’, he took Gallacher as his example of the ‘frame of mind and the viewpoint of young Communists, or of the rank and file of workers who have just begun to arrive at Communism’. Gallacher was then aged thirty-eight.59

Naturally, this authoritative formulation was routinely invoked against the young and impetuous, as the twenty-six year-old Rothstein did in 1926 against Cohen’s case for a Workers’ Government.60 On the other hand, in representing not continuity but the sharpest cleavage with social democracy, Bolshevism also combined a quality of youthful insurgency with its revolutionary seniority. When, also in 1926, the Shop Assistants’ official J.R. Leslie referred to the Russians as ‘mere children as far as the Trade Union movement is concerned’, Pollitt replied pugnaciously: ‘In 1917 these “children” lacking the compromising defeatist spirit of our “older bureaucrats and trade union leaders” did capture political power... while we, who take refuge in our age-long experience are simply witnessing the steady worsening of our conditions.’61 For the CPGB itself, which could not yet boast the achievements of an accomplished revolution, it only made sense to look to the future as ‘a young party... only now definitely breaking out of the old, old traditions surrounding its formation’.62

Whether as strength or limitation, the CPGB’s identity as a young party was therefore reaffirmed. Nevertheless, even in this first age of British communism figures like Pollitt and Gallacher also gave sign of having internalised the codes of seniority which governed the trade-union cultures in which they had been formed. The equation was a complex one, for communists also stood for the democratisation of the unions, the overhaul of their existing leaderships and the removal of lengthy membership qualifications or excessive longevity of service.63 Nevertheless, just as the commitment to industrial unionism did not wholly displace the ethos of the skilled worker, so the call to ‘change your leaders’, and to do so more often, could coexist with a recognition of the claims of service to the movement. Again, what was crucial was the political context: that of the emergence within the labour movement of a new breed of younger, professional parliamentarian, advanced on ostensible grounds of ability, but in almost every case as the by-product of social and educational advantage. The Welsh miners’ leader Frank Hodges was one of the few such cases from a working-class background, and yet Pollitt, himself aged thirty-one, took strong issue with what he called Hodges’ ‘extremely dirty upstart from Ruskin College who at 34 is a snobbish prig, and has forgotten that the miners paid for his education to enable him to fight their battles against capitalism. If Hodges is half the man that Bob Smillie is when he arrives at the latter’s age he will have done well.64

More commonly, such presumption was identified with the middle-class interloper, and in a moment of goodwill, Gallacher even included the
ultra-moderate Clynes among the ‘veteran fighters’ whom he defended from the sneers of ‘smart young barristers and other professionals from the camps of Liberalism and Toryism’.65

It is true that these old stalwarts were also depicted as ‘stout, elderly gentlemen who knew how to dine and wine well and who would never have deceived even a child into believing that they had any interest in the class struggle’.66 In the bitterly divided Scottish coalfields, the ‘new communist cadre self-consciously claimed to represent the aspirations of “the young miners”’, while even the ‘legalist’ Horner expounded a sharp critique of officialdom, whose exclusion from a rank-and-file executive proved the key to communist advances within the union after 1934.67 In Pollitt’s own union, the Boilermakers, a similar analysis was linked with the issue of changing work conditions, so that Pollitt scorned its longest-serving members as ‘hopelessly out of touch with modern workshop practices’ as well as the new political currents of the age.68 Even so, the discourse of the ‘veteran’, to be honoured on grounds of longevity, would naturally only become more pronounced with the ageing of Pollitt and Gallacher themselves.

To some extent this must have been true of each successive generational cohort. As a post-war fixture as Teesside district organiser, ILS alumnus George Short used to put down younger comrades by recalling his activities ‘before you were a twinkle in your father’s eye’.69 For Short, born in 1900, this was combined with unwavering pro-Sovietism, for the Russian Revolution occurred for him at precisely that formative age at which Mannheim suggested that the independent reflection of the individual begins.70 For members of the CPGB’s foundation cohort, by the same token, the sense of having been politically formed before the communist party not only shaped their original world-view without a Bolshevik reference point but provided a form of personal capital offsetting dependence on the ‘party’ or the Russians. Even Gallacher, while famously bending to Lenin’s will on his first visit to Moscow, retained sufficient sense of revolutionary manhood to claim to have answered him back in his own terms. ‘... I informed Comrade Lenin that he could treat me as an infant while I was in Britain and he was in Moscow, but, I added, “Now that I am here, you’ll find that I’m an old hand at this game”’.71

Though Pollitt, like Gallacher, consistently deferred to Lenin and later to Stalin—who in party correspondence was sometimes referred to, not as the boss or chief (the Russian vodch) but as the ‘old man’—he bristled at the condescension of lesser Russians. ‘You write to us as if we were a lot of children’, he wrote to one of them in 1924 on taking over as secretary of the M inority M ovement, adding ‘please understand that you cannot talk to me as if I were a child, or someone dependent upon you for a living’.72 When J.T. M urphy arrived as the CPGB’s representative in Moscow in the summer of 1926, he allowed himself a similar note of defiance. ‘I still feel that the praise given to our Party is that of the father to the good boy. Perhaps when Father has made a few more blunders he will see that the boy has grown up.’73 Murphy however succeeded in maintaining this attitude for barely a month, and still five years later Pollitt was referring to the CPGB as a ‘child [which] gets spanked and smacked and comes up smiling’ to the puzzlement even of its ‘foster-parents’.74

As for the collective, so for the individual: while psychologically conducive to a greater sense of independence, the deployment of a record of service or struggle in inner-party disputes was almost always unavailing given the absence of customs or procedures for the recognition of such claims. In 1931 the veteran miners’ activist Nat Watkins protested against his removal as Miners’ M inority M ovement secretary, detailing a record of industrial responsibilities going back to 1896 and castigating his replacements as an ‘office-boy leadership’.75 The same year, his fellow miner, Arthur Horner, defended himself against charges of ‘Hornerism’ by contrasting his record of more than twenty years of revolutionary activity with that of party bureaucrats lacking any comparable experience.76 In both cases, Pollitt upheld the party’s authority, even while assuring Horner that he too had ‘been through the same school’ and had the same trade union experience: ‘on many things I can well understand how you have felt’.77 Eight years later, when he himself clashed with the Comintern over the war, Pollitt drew on these resources on his own account. ‘I was in this movement practically before you were born’, he pointed out to Dutt, his principal antagonist on the central committee, and implicitly counterposed his formative experience of the First World War with the later disciplines of the Comintern:

I was 24, had never heard of Bolshevism. H ad never heard of the Basle resolution, but had a class instinct which was sound and I suppose I got as many physical beatings up for going round Lancashire endeavouring to get that war transferred into a civil war as any person in this country. H as got the same class instinct... now...78

Here generation was inextricably mixed with ideas of class, masculinity and the unbiddable time-served worker. In the memoirs which he wrote
immediately after being removed as general secretary, Pollitt made sure to include the letter he received from his mother reminding him that his marking-off tools were still in vaseline, ready for use at any time. It was no accident that Pollitt called the book Serving My Time, nor that what it contributed to his personal standing was what it revealed of his labour movement credentials before the CPGB was formed.

The toolmaker Wal Hannington drew on the same stock of ideas. In a dispute over the disregarding of his own seniority in relation to party nominations within the AEU, he pointedly remarked that he at least ‘did not require the Russian revolution to inspire me to Socialism’ and, like Watkins, provided a sort of labour movement curriculum vitae to corroborate the statement. Such an example suggests the possible significance of just a year or two in constructions of generation, for while Hannington was only four years older than Short, this permitted him something of the bearing of an old Bolshevik, who had even rubbed shoulders with Chicherin and Litvinov in the Kentish Town branch of the BSP. However, there was also a second crucial distinction of class, for Hannington was an exact contemporary of Dutt’s; and yet where Dutt was for many years identified with the milieu of the student and former student, already by 1916 Hannington regarded himself as initiated into the adult world of working-class politics. Memoirs of the middle-class rebellion of the LRD, like Margaret Cole’s Growing up into Revolution (1949), strongly emphasise its youth. Conversely, Hannington’s account of the inter-war years contains little suggestion of his youth, but on the contrary introduces him on the very first page as an ‘elected shop steward on behalf of the men’.

Though to some extent they acted as a surrogate for that experience, the working-class selection criteria used for advancement within the party apparatus and ILS also perpetuated the identification of class and a sort of toughness or virility. Gabriel Carritt, whom we saw in Chapter 2 was acutely conscious of his class origin, recalled the ‘old brigade’ running King Street as comprising ‘very tough characters who emerged out of the working class, almost of the last [nineteenth] century’. It was a revealing observation, for though Pollitt was their epitome, all but one of the other five names Carritt mentioned were born within a decade of Carritt himself, in 1908. Three, as it happened, had attended the Lenin School. One was actually six years younger than Carritt. The comment is the more noteworthy in that Carritt himself had led anything but a cloistered existence. An associate of Auden, Spender and Isherwood in his earlier years, he had campaigned in the USA for the Scottsboro boys, undertaken a clandestine mission to Nazi Germany, served in the Fourteenth Burma Army and twice achieved significant minority polls in parliamentary elections. It says something of how these credentials were valued by the party that in 1948—at the age of forty— he was appointed London secretary of the Young Communist League. When at the age of forty-two he was at last released for full-time party work, it was as part of a YCL leading cadre generally infringing the league’s age limit, which itself had been raised to thirty, and which in two other cases was scarcely younger than Carritt himself.

Though the worst anomalies were thus put right, the ageing of the YCL’s leading cadre was symptomatic of the party’s overall profile as well as the possible battening and clamping of the YCL itself. Already by the late 1940s, the average age of the CPGB executive was over forty, reaching the fifty mark in 1958–9. By this time, nearly half of congress delegates were aged over forty, and the proportion aged under thirty-five had halved from the high point of 70 per cent in the late 1930s. At the leadership level, it was only in 1965 that Gollan began to take a more systematic approach to bringing on younger elements, with Dutt among the most reluctant to make way for them. Easily doctored though such images were, even the construction of the archetypal activist in the party’s literature appeared to have aged. In 1936, when J.R. Campbell scripted an all-male ‘workshop talk’ about politics, the communist was depicted as a pulloved young man, winning over older interlocutors including a bookish-looking ILPer. In Hymie Fagan’s England for All, a similar conceit cast the narrator as a union stalwart and the hero as a young communist, not yet married and bearing the solid English name of Bill Taylor. Newly arrived in the district, Taylor becomes convenor at the local motor works and manages to organise it within three months of arriving: ‘Talk about fireworks!’ Ten years on, when Pollitt addressed his own ‘open letter’ to trade unionists, Bill had obviously settled down (‘Every Friday night when you hand your wages over to your wife...’) and needed reminding that younger workers too needed consideration. ‘Do not hammer them down because they do not know the union rules as well as we do.... We want them to shake us old ‘uns up a bit.’ Another ten years, and like the 1930s’ firebrand and Austin’s convenor, Dick Etheridge, he would no doubt have been warning about the disruption that younger leftists were liable to cause.

Generational differences thus reflected changing experiences and work cultures as much as politics in the narrower sense. Already in the 1930s, where formal or informal apprenticeship systems were seen as providing a form of induction into the values and cultures of the workplace, the absence of such relationships in the new industries of the
south was identified not with more militant forms of activism but with an individualised sense of ‘independence’, militating against ‘organisation by their elders’. Hannington by the late 1950s was like a gloomy harbinger of the affluent worker thesis. ‘I suppose they look back upon us as complacent old foggies’, he commented of ‘Rock ’n Rollers’ who knew nothing of earlier struggles:

But we did know how to get excited about things that mattered and how to stand up and fight for real trade union principles. I’m afraid I get frequently disappointed these days at the indifference which so many young people show towards such matters. The plain fact is that industrial life for them is dead easy compared with the conditions that we had to face.89

Though directed against the ideologists of ‘affluence’ within the Labour Party, Pollitt’s repeated invocation of the ‘pioneers’ and their street-corner meetings opened up a wider generational cleavage from which a ‘new’ left would also emerge from within the CPGB itself. As the Daily Worker’s youngest journalist put it in 1956, ‘what was good enough for our grandfathers is not necessarily good enough for us’.90

Though often remembered as a revolt of the intellectuals, we have seen that the crisis that hit the CPGB that year may also be regarded in generational terms, as the breaking away of part of the party’s popular front enrolment. If, like Eric Hobsbawm, we take the turn to anti-fascism as the dividing line, only a handful of party recruits from before that period are recorded as leaving the party in 1956–7, and one of these—the youngest journalist put it in 1956, ‘what was good enough for our grandfathers is not necessarily good enough for us’.90

Alec Moffat—rejoined three years later. Anecdotal evidence from Scotland suggests that those leaving tended to be younger recruits from before or just after the war,92 and this is borne out by the attendance at party congresses. As the one held in April 1956, just as the Khrushchev disclosures were being made public, 42 per cent of delegates were aged under thirty, and 67 per cent under thirty-five. A year later, the proportions had fallen to 17 per cent and 36 per cent respectively. Though special care had no doubt been taken to filter out dissenting voices, this would only confirm the identification of the opposition with the party’s younger members.

Despite the tellingly familiar form of address, calls to ‘Sack Harry’ revealed how Pollitt more than anybody now personified what was wrong with the party. Already in 1945, even the Lancashire ‘old faithful’ were said to be making way for younger audiences for whom he had no special significance, and for whom his style of oratory was beginning to seem dated.93 ‘To me Harry is linked with Spain, anti-appeasement and the Hunger Marches’, John Saville wrote to E. P. Thompson in 1956. ‘He’s washed up now, but the affection for Harry is tremendous among my generation.’94 Saville had joined the party in 1934, Thompson in 1942, which evidently felt to them like two different generations. Nevertheless, they left the party together, and together opened up a new chapter in the history of the British left.

From that point on, the CPGB was doubly the victim of generational divisions, both within the party itself and between the party and its younger rivals. When in 1967 the twenty-two year old Martin Jacques was found a seat on the party executive, he remembers encountering ‘almost a wall between the generations’, exacerbated by a post-1956 exodus leaving nothing much between the popular front enrolments and contemporaries of Jacques himself.95 Occasionally attending the political committee as the student representative, David Aaronovitch was amazed to see the assembled luminaries communicate with each other by launching screwed up balls of paper containing messages. ‘You’d be asked a question… [and] a ball would go whizzing past your head, chucked from the industrial person to the deputy general secretary… Talk about establishing… an order of who’s important…’96 That Jacques and Aaronovitch were both second-generation communists is itself significant, for we have seen that, for some recruits, the fact that the CPGB was not a youth or student-dominated organisation was one of its distinctive attractions. On the other hand, to the extent that there was a generational revolt within the party, its main protagonists were second or third-generation communists—Beatrix Campbell was another—acting out the conflicts of the time within the environment in which they had been brought up. Few indeed can have been drawn to the party as itself a vehicle of that revolt.

For better or worse, joining the party in its later years therefore meant getting involved with a lot of older relatives. Mike Jones was a young industrial activist, enthused by the Vietminh, who joined its ranks in Chester in 1965. Like Bill Taylor in the pamphlet, he expected to see some fireworks. Instead, he was set to work collecting retired members’ dues in the hinterlands of Cheshire and North Wales, and like a 1920s’ Bolshevik suggested writing them off. ‘Years later I could see, if you’d been in the party all your life and you were now retired and… couldn’t get about so much, if they suddenly said you weren’t a member, you’d be most upset. I suppose it was youthful enthusiasm or militancy, thinking we’d got better things to do: we’re fighting the class war, we can’t be social workers with old age pensioners up in the hills!’97 Like young people in the 1940s joining the CPGB despite reservations about Stalinism, Jones
in 1969 joined the International Socialists despite reservations about Trotskyism. Whatever its political attractions, the CPGB by this time could not compete when it came to offering pyrotechnics.

**Lines of succession**

What the communists did offer was a radical genealogy and sense of history whose character shifted over time from the teleological to the commemorative. Though to some extent this reflected an ageing process, the CPGB had long evinced a fascination with political precursors and alternative leadership figures. Particularly since the rediscovered radical lineages of the popular front, no party representing the future could have been readier to celebrate its antecedents, whether through the several media of literature, pageant, folk song and opera, or through the seminal work of the communist party historians. With a very few exceptions, the best known of the latter were not just historians but British historians, providing in their most rigorous and developed form genealogies which located and legitimised the CPGB while at the same time honouring its forbears.

As for the party, so for individual members, an engagement with communist politics was linked with the influence of non-contemporaneous contemporaries encountered in the home, the school or the workplace. ‘I was a rebel along with my dad’, recalled an inter-war recruit, and whether through the direct transmission of ideas or institutional affiliations, or simply the example of an activist stance towards the world, elements of what we have called a continuity narrative were surprisingly common. Rebels along with their mums, dads, teachers or older workmates, the only seeming ‘paradox’ of differentiated generational relationships was a marked feature of this least iconoclastic of revolutionary movements.

The most immediate and probably the commonest line of succession was that within the family. Our figures suggest that around a quarter of all communists had parents who themselves were party members or what Pamela Graves describes as ‘cadre activists’ in other labour movement organisations. Although in earlier decades they were more likely to have come from non-party socialist backgrounds, already by the 1940s the so-called ‘party family’ was established as a prolific channel of recruitment, giving way in its turn to a further shift by which the offspring of these families increasingly found their way into a variety of other forms of left-wing politics. The phenomenon was not peculiar to the CPGB, and figures from studies made elsewhere are at first sight more striking. In the Isère region in France, for example, two-thirds of party members came from a left-wing family, and nearly half had at least one family member in the PCF. Similar phenomena can be identified in Italy, Finland, early post-war Germany and no doubt more generally.

Given the relatively modest proportions and weak subcultural characteristics of the CPGB and Britain’s wider activist left, continuities on quite that scale are difficult to imagine. Even so, the statistical over-representation of such cases provides a better guide to communist recruitment than probably any other single correlate. This includes those of initially greater visibility such as the coalminers whose numerical predominance after 1926 was secured by the adherence of perhaps one in two hundred of their number. If the most minimal and consensual form of left-wing ‘activism’ in the period of the CPGB’s foundation was to take the ‘rebel’ Daily Herald, barely 200,000 households met this requirement. The individual membership of all socialist organisations, however nominal in character, was of a similar order. The disproportionate recruitment of CPGB members from such households thus bears out the ‘principle of family succession’ as a factor explaining the incidence and character of political activism.

Just as the family itself was shaped by a range of social, cultural and demographic pressures, so the lines of family succession assumed a variety of forms, some more obvious than others. Not only the impact of events and the changing profiles of different political parties, but dislocation into new working and residential environments meant that inherited traditions could take on different institutional expressions. Moreover, exactly as communists themselves had experiences of being socially or geographically uprooted, similar pressures in earlier generations made for dispersed family connections concealing disparate social or political influences unsuspected within the immediate home environment. Metroland-type recruits like Alison Macleod and Brian Pearce mentioned the influence of distant socialist uncles or great uncles, offsetting more respectable or politically Conservative upbringings. Such influences cannot be counterposed to the impact of contemporary events, but on the contrary were effective to the extent that they were corroborated by, or helped explain, national and world affairs. In the same way, where such seeds bore fruit, the actual party affiliations adopted were likely to be those most immediately accessible or compelling, which is why where they resulted in communism they so often date from the CPGB’s heyday.

Personal influences could be reinforced by the broadening of social horizons, like Macleod being escorted by her great uncle round the
Edinburgh slums. The future London CPGB organiser Ted Bramley provides a striking example of the same sort of influence. Brought up in a slum district of Westminster, Bramley’s parents were founding members of the local Labour Party, avid readers of the socialist press and former activists respectively in the SDF and the women’s suffrage movement. Ignoring their remonstrations, Bramley nevertheless became an enthusiastic Boy Scout, ‘well trained in the merits of the Empire’ and accustomed to parading at one of London’s ‘poshest’ churches, just behind Buckingham Palace. It was only in 1926, at the age of twenty-one, that he stayed with an uncle in the South Wales coalfield and was convinced at last that the system that gave rise to such conditions should not be tolerated. Indirectly, that again suggests the influence of migrations within the family, though Bramley even as a communist continued to attribute his belief in the immorality of capitalism to the religious convictions he had picked up during his ‘Boy Scout training’. Speaking just up the road in Trafalgar Square in 1942, it was fitting that he should have provided a particularly fulsome example of the party’s wartime patriotism, calling on the shades of Nelson himself to answer ‘Stalin’s call’.106

Bramley’s involvement in the scouts, doubtless in the absence of any local socialist youth or children’s organisation, underlines how the relatively exiguous subcultural characteristics of the British left also lent an obliqueness to these lines of succession. The YCL did function unevenly as the youth section of the ‘family party’, particularly in the early post-war decades. Including what was no doubt a good proportion of dual members, it even doubled in size between the mid-1940s and early 1950s. Nevertheless, this still represented a peak post-war membership of barely 3,000—smaller, in proportion to the party, than in the 1930s—and many ‘party parents’ simply ignored pressures to enrol their children in the YCL.108 In later years, when children from communist families not infrequently went to university, it was often at this point that they would reaffirm a communist inheritance among associates of their own generation. Some were actually discouraged from joining the YCL, perhaps while they got on with their studies. In other cases, parents might have switched, abandoned or renegotiated political affiliations as their children were growing up, sometimes for political reasons, sometimes as a direct result of their family responsibilities. If in this sense membership was not ‘a social identity taken for life’ but a ‘temporary segment’ of that life, influences nevertheless lingered on in childhood memories, books around the house or just a running daily news commentary.110

This again could lead to convoluted patterns. Jim Cannon, a Wigan miner and foundation party member, left during Class Against Class and strongly disapproved of his son making what he regarded as the same mistake of joining in 1939.111 Communists themselves could react in similar fashion, and Peter Kerrigan broke all contact with one of his daughters when she became a Trotskyist.112 More commonly, however, there was a sort of mutual recognition. One interviewee recalled of his daughter, who was active with the Islington Gutter Press, ‘if there hadn’t been so many other alternatives, she would have been a heavy-duty communist’.113 Another respondent, who had himself since become a Labour councillor and environmentalist, described his children and grandchildren as having ‘independently found ways of assuming social responsibility in the Communist Tradition’.114 Even Rose Kerrigan, unlike her husband, respected her daughter’s right to her own opinion—as long as she did not become a Conservative. She also made an observation which nobody familiar with Kerrigan or Trotskyism will find surprising: ‘What she did was a different form, she thought she was doing it her way, but she’s the one that’s most like him in every way’.115

Even within the home, it is not always possible to isolate individual influences in what was often a form of socialist milieu. Sometimes, extended family networks reinforced one another, as aunts, uncles and grandparents gathered in what really did feel like a closed society. Patterns of sibling recruitment can betray the independent influence of a brother or sister, but just as commonly functioned as a mediating mechanism for shared formative influences. On the Manchester database, where family influences are cited as a factor in party recruitment, the fifty-nine cases mentioning older-generational influences (parents or other older relatives) are exactly balanced by the number mentioning same or younger-generational influences (siblings, spouses or children). However, of the twenty-six cases citing sibling influences, eleven also mention the active support of parents for the Labour movement, the political left or working-class education. Moreover, of the remaining fifteen cases, at least nine were Jewish, further underlining the particular significance which generational cleavages had in Jewish party recruitment. There were also three cases where the sibling’s influence followed the death of one or both parents. In one or two cases, there was no direct connection between sibling recruitment at all, and brothers or sisters brought up in socialist or progressive environments became communists in entirely different circumstances, sometimes years, and in one case continents, apart.117

Further confirmation of these milieu characteristics can be found in those cases where the recruitment of one family member led to the
enrolment, not only of brothers and sisters, but of parents or other older relatives. Here the lines of succession can become tangled up completely, with intergenerational influences running in both directions. Eric Godfrey for example, was brought up in an atmosphere of pacifism, religious nonconformity, ‘fighting trade unionism’ and ‘vigorous anti-imperialist Socialism’, joining the CPGB in 1926. His father, a railwayman and former secretary of Guildford Trades Council, who had been a friend of Edward Carpenter, followed his son into the party after visiting Russia in 1931. Gladys Cattermole, like the younger Godfrey, was a worker in a Soviet enterprise who had declined to follow her mother into Labour’s ranks, as ‘a party of fine phrases and no action’, but again was followed by her mother into the communist party. Gil Bradbury, later Labour’s ranks, as ‘a party of fine phrases and no action’, but again was followed by her mother into the communist party. Gil Bradbury, later Labour’s ranks, as ‘a party of fine phrases and no action’, but again was followed by her mother into the communist party. Gil Bradbury, later Labour’s ranks, as ‘a party of fine phrases and no action’, but again was followed by her mother into the communist party. Gil Bradbury, later Labour’s ranks, as ‘a party of fine phrases and no action’, but again was followed by her mother into the communist party. Gil Bradbury, later Labour’s ranks, as ‘a party of fine phrases and no action’, but again was followed by her mother into the communist party. Gil Bradbury, later Labour’s ranks, as ‘a party of fine phrases and no action’, but again was followed by her mother into the communist party.

Interestingly, his father and brother were already members of the ILP, though it appears that his sister and mother were not. If that again suggests that potential women recruits were less likely to encounter opportunities to become politically involved outside of the domestic sphere, then it is not surprising that mothers were more likely than fathers to be recruited by their sons. Thus, although Jimmy Oates in Aberdeen was taken by his mother to meetings over Spain, she only joined the communist party herself after he had made the initial link through his workplace associations. As Oates himself put it, it was a ‘question of contact’.

Amid these varied lines of succession, the nurturing of child by parent into the world of socialist activism had a special symbolic resonance, not least because of its rendering in Pollitt’s Serving My Time. Attending the local Socialist Sunday School, reading his parents’ copies of the Clarion and Freethinker and taken by his mother to be enrolled in the local ILP branch, Pollitt was the archetype of what we can call the ‘cradle socialist’, or the ‘cradle communist’ that followed with the CPGB’s formation. Luisa Passerini describes the narrative of the ‘born Socialist’ as a form ‘of boasting that where one comes from is better than anywhere else in the world’, and it is significant that Pollitt should have produced such a narrative at the moment of his disillusionment with the international in 1939–40. If that again suggests a form of personal capital in relation to the party, claims of pride and authenticity also answered allegations of extraneousness to British society, so that Pollitt’s memoirs were celebrated in just these terms even by Dutt.

In interviews and party autobiographies cradle communists often refer to joining the party as a ‘natural’ process, with no particular event marking or precipitating the transition. One even compared it to confirmation, though this, like other religions, was only seemingly natural and was frequently thrown off in the course of reaching adulthood. Nevertheless, for those most deeply affected by such an upbringing it made for a particular quality of attachment, sometimes surviving formal political differences. Harold Rosen was the archetypal cradle communist, accompanying his mother to committee meetings, imbued by her with anti-imperialist principles and called on to stand up for them as the one child at school not recognising Empire Day. A party member since 1935, in 1956 Rosen was one of the thousands of his generation who left the party, though in a deeper sense he could never quite leave it behind. ‘I’ve never been anything other than what I would call a communist, but I didn’t have a party to belong to any more’, he reflected decades later. ‘I tried joining the Labour Party but it was a mistake, and I thought, ‘God, my mother would turn in her grave at this.’

Rosen’s experiences, like Pollitt’s, suggest that the parent’s role as political mentor was a deeply gendered one. In some accounts of women’s political activism, like Pamela Graves’s, what Passerini calls ‘the concurrence of political idealism and the father-daughter relationship’ receives some support. However, in the CPGB’s case what is striking about father-daughter and even father-son relationships is their specificity and to some extent their exceptionality. As indicated in Chapter 4, the view that daughters were more likely than sons to inherit their parents’ political commitments largely reflects their lower levels of politicisation through other channels, and there was no marked gender differential among the children of such activist families. On the other hand, regarding parental roles there appear to have been important differences between communist parents and the wider activist population considered by Graves. Indeed, if one bears in mind the far smaller numbers of female ‘cadres’, and particularly female cadres with children, it is the role of the mother in communist party families which is more immediately impressive. Though some fathers were absent in the pub, like Pollitt’s, and some absent altogether, like Rosen’s, for most cradle communists the phenomenon of the absent father was identified with heavy political commitments of the male party activist and the explicit priority which the party gave to the male world of industrial work. It was not his father but his mother, for example, whom the young Pat Devine recalls singing revolutionary songs to him in the bath and reading him stories from the life of Lenin. In the typical party family, it was the relationship between the children and their mother that was most significant.

Conversely, where communists mention the political role of their
fathers, it is striking that in the great majority of cases these were not themselves communists at the time that their sons or daughters became politically active. Two examples from Yorkshire between the wars are Betty Kane, whose father was an ‘armchair socialist’ who took her to both Labour and communist and meetings in Sheffield, and Betty Harrison, who accompanied her father round the West Riding campaigning for the ILP. M arian Jessop, whose father became a prominent Labour councillor in Leeds, began her book The Petticoat Rebellion with a dedication to him, like Pollitt’s in Serving My Time, but inverting it in gender terms. ‘I was lucky to be born of a father who is a socialist’, she began. ‘I told everyone I was a socialist, but what I was really saying was ‘My dad is a socialist, so I am a socialist too’.’ Prefacing a history of the women’s movement, the dedication barely mentioned her mother.

Fathers who were themselves communists did not often earn such tributes. Graves found that ‘the daughters of ILP men in particular emphasised socialism as a life lived according to an ethical code which governed relationships at home, in the community and internationally’. In contrast, though communist fathers were not necessarily any less committed to their own code of ethics, this was focused on public activism, the point of production and the relentless pressure of activities away from the home. Even exceptions seem to confirm the general rule. In Birtley, County Durham, Bill Hall was a model father: changing nappies, doing the housework during his wife’s confinements, organising Sunday picnics in defiance of the local chapel culture—and bringing all seven of his children with him into the communist movement. ‘Politics was never for me a grim thing like some party members’, recalled one of them. ‘Politics for us was enjoying life.’ What was also distinctive about Hall, however, was the continuing influence of his ILP background, reflected in the encouragement he gave his children to read writers like Morris and Edward Carpenter, and his attempts to foster egalitarian gender relations within the home. In Brighton, James Austin Smith was the leading figure in a successful party branch, based on a closely knit membership of ‘whole families’ and marked by an especially pronounced sense of comradeship. Again, it seems significant that Smith had been a member of the ILP and then the Labour Party from as early as the first decade of the century, joining the CPGB only in 1939.

A further insight into workplace cultures is that fathers identified as key formative influences tended not to have a part in strong collective work and union-based identities, or else to have been dislocated from them as a result of victimisation or unemployment. This, no doubt, is why so many of these relationships date from the inter-war years, and might offer a further clue as to why they figure strongly in Graves’s research on this period. Hall, for example, was a sheet-metal worker by trade, but was victimised in 1921 and like others in the same position obtained work as a co-operative insurance agent. Though the fathers of both Kane and Jessop were engineers, Jessop too describes hers as enduring long periods of unemployment on account of his union activities between the wars. In the South Wales coalfield, two communist fathers standing out as introducing their daughters to politics were not miners at this point, but respectively a storeman and fish-shop proprietor. Also from the coalfields, Mary Doherty of Cowdenbeath provided a depiction of a father-daughter relationship in her memoir A Miner’s Lass. ‘He discussed all the working class issues with me… and what should be done to create a socialist society’, she wrote. ‘It was inevitable that I would join the Communist Party and in 1926 I did.’ However, despite the title Doherty gave her book, her father was victimised in 1921, and as a casual labourer was reduced to collecting old railway sleepers to sell as firewood. Hence perhaps the seemingly unusual quality of their relationship: at the first party training class Doherty attended, only two of the fifty present were either miners’ lasses or anybody else’s lasses.

If higher rates of male recruitment were attributable to influences beyond the family, forms of mentorship within the workplace were perhaps the most heavily gendered of all. These workplace cultures and environments were at least as disparate as the varieties of the family, and can only be conveyed in summary form at the risk of severe over-simplification. Nevertheless, it does seem clear that these forms of mentorship were most significant where there were strong traditions of inter-generational induction into the skills and customs of the male worker, and where either working practices, working environments or strong independent union cultures provided a space in which values and ideas could be transmitted without regard to managerial oversight. In some of these cases, there was no sharp distinction between these and familial lines of succession, as father-son relationships found expression in the masculine world of the workplace. Miners’ lads were a possible case in point. In South Wales, we have noted three mining communists, Idris Cox, Dai Lloyd Davies and Henry Hurn, who all described their fathers playing this role of introducing them to the wider world of union and workplace, which in turn provided their introduction to socialism. Cox, for example, referred to learning to ‘join in the talk of the older miners’, and becoming interested in socialism through the influence of an older
miner working alongside him. Davies in the Rhondda, born in 1889, a decade prior to the other two, established himself before the First World War as the ‘faithful, youthful and enthusiastic’ deputy to the syndicalist Noah Ablett.\textsuperscript{139}

Despite the lack of any formal apprenticeship, the progression in mining from pit boy to hewer was analogous to apprenticeship cultures and occasionally referred to in precisely these terms.\textsuperscript{140} In other occupations, a more direct relationship can sometimes be established between apprenticeship and political education. Gary M acartney was an apprentice blacksmith in Glasgow who singled out the influence of a former communist, John H ill, whose political lessons were later reflected in M acartney himself becoming a communist through involvement in the NU WM. ‘So I learned my apprenticeship in more ways than one; not only to be a coach blacksmith but to realise what life was going to be about and that we would be following on in the footsteps of such people as John H ill.’\textsuperscript{141} Where M acartney stressed the influence of an individual, others remembered the impression made by collectivities of skilled craftsmen and the examples they provided of ‘real democracy in action’.\textsuperscript{142} In the post-war period, a layer of older communists now themselves provided both individual and collective exemplars, either encountered in working relationships or through the responsible positions that many communists occupied in the workplace, allowing their culture of leadership a scope for expression that had few parallels in the world beyond. Winning respect as ‘trade union’ comrades, in some cases the lineage reproduced itself almost without setting foot outside the factory gate.\textsuperscript{143}

In the older craft milieux, inter-generational relations were sometimes assisted by the informality of communications classically represented in the dinner-break dialogues of Tressell’s Ragged Trousered Philanthropists. ‘And then... the older men you worked with always had stories to tell’, recalled one, whose mentor as a French polisher was a veteran of the anti-Soviet wars of intervention who seemed to see the political moral in whatever subject they talked about. Within the Woodworkers’ society of the late 1930s, both the future Labour politician Eric Heffer and the future UCATT president Arthur Utting were set on course for communism by ‘elderly’ workmates who lent them the Webbs’ Soviet Communism, to which the ASW had taken out a bulk order. Both of them also stressed the significance of the ASW branches as a political ‘training ground’.\textsuperscript{144} For Jewish communists, the small workshop sometimes provided the same opporunity for political contact, and Hymie Fagan, creator of the fictional Bill Taylor, recalled the tailoring workshops of the 1920s as his ‘university’. He too, however, also picked out the influence of a particu-
of Youth. Though such teachers often reinforced home influences, sometimes their role was more obviously formative. Betty Reid, for example, who was brought up in a middle-class home of stifling conservatism and philistinism, singled out the influence of her history teacher in the ‘liberating’ step she took of joining the LLY. Reid also mentioned the influence of her county librarian, and the debt expressed to the public library by a number of interviewees—‘the best institution’, said one, ‘this country’s ever had’—was that it was free of the class and gender barriers so often encountered in the schoolroom.

These, indeed, can hardly be overstated. Though there were exceptions, Scottish more often than English, the entrenchment of the class system in education is reflected in the fact that almost all of the positive recollections of schoolteachers we identified relate to grammar schools or private schools. Eric Heffer was one exception: he had a socialist teacher in Hertford—naturally from South Wales—who introduced him to writers like Remarque and Upton Sinclair. A mother was the future engineering activist and labour historian Eddie Frow, whose history teacher was again a socialist, whose lectures Frow later attended at Leeds Labour College. By and large, however, for working-class children positive memories of school have to be balanced against stories of cruelty, racism, the humiliation of ‘school money’ and the general lack of either individual opportunity or any culture of expectation. ‘I couldn’t get out quick enough’, said one, a voracious reader who obtained his education via the public library. With parents either weeping or beaming satisfaction according to the case, numerous accounts describe the child as being prematurely withdrawn from school to earn a living.

Beyond the state system, boarding schools offered the possibility of a more intensive and socially restricted influence. Even a single communist teacher in a conventional school might offer an antidote to ‘backbone of England’ upbringings of ‘material comfort and mental stoupur’. Sometimes the whole school offered such an environment. One was the Liberal-favoured Gresham’s School, Holt, whose several communist alumni included the spy Donald Maclean and the intellectual functionary James Klugmann. Another was A.S. Neill’s Summerhill, where the poet Richard Goodman was perhaps the most influential of the communist teachers. Ros Faith was another product of a backbone of England home: an Arnold-Forster whose grandfather had been a minister under Balfour. She too, however, attended a ‘progressive’ public school, where she was taken under the wing of the communist historian and translator, Louis Marks, who took her along to meetings of the CPGB historians’ group. Subsequently herself a distinguished historian, her experiences again illustrate how both the embrace and rejection of the past were accommodated by a communist commitment.

Trajectories of the left

In evoking the ‘lost world’ of British communism, Raphael Samuel commented on how communism ‘seemed to run in families, though laterally, within a single age band, rather than, as in Labour homes, as a hereditary affair’. Even among Jewish communists, this cannot have been a hard-and-fast rule, for Samuel himself was the archetypal cradle communist, brought up as a ‘true believer’ with communist aunts and uncles as well as cousins. Nevertheless, the relatively brief appearance of communism in British political life does suggest, either that not too much should be made of its hereditary aspects, or that what was inherited was not necessarily a party affiliation, but a looser package of values, cultural reference points and political practices which in a longer perspective were not coterminous with any single institution. Indeed, it is only on this understanding that the ‘principle of family succession’ can be reconciled with the ebb and flow of particular political movements. Exactly as we can trace the Labour movement backgrounds of many communists, attention has been drawn to Labour activists’ Liberal or radical home backgrounds, particularly in the early twentieth century. To the customary interplay of the indigenous and external in the history of British communism, there might therefore be added the further entanglement of successive generational cohorts, sometimes distinguished by dramatic political punctuations, but also linked by the transmission of ideas and construction of traditions seeping over the boundaries of period and institutional affiliation. To borrow Mannheim’s distinction, these sometimes took the form of consciously recognised models, claimed by the communists though not by them alone; but they can also be detected in the merely ‘implicit’ or ‘virtual’ patterns by which older forms of action and belief were reworked or transformed in the making of a new political generation.

As well as revolutionary and democratic antecedents directly claimed by the party, other echoes are therefore also discernible, formally transgendered in the higher consciousness of communism but finally proving more enduring than the party itself. M argot H einemann recalled of her own 1930s’ generation that their parents had already done much of their thinking for them. M ore than that, from the WEA and the LRD,
to the myriad local bodies of the Labour movement, they had also established many of the institutions in which communists were to do much of their doing as well. This was particularly the case once the counter-cultural ambitions of Class Against Class gave way in the 1930s to a Labour movement orientation and the more insidious logic of front politics. Despite the proliferation of new organisations, this represented not just a broadening out of communist activities but the acknowledgement of disparate legacies from their forbears, like a popular front with the past.

How the communists related to these traditions, which remained embodied in both contemporaneous and non-contemporaneous contemporaries, was at all times a matter of considerable tension and ambiguity. In his study of the Oxford extra-mural tradition, Lawrence Goldman emphasises the bitterness which arose over the alleged communist infiltration of the adult education movement in the 1940s. On the other hand, with its overtones of ‘misplaced idealism’ on the one side, and of a general lack of ‘ruthlessness’ towards the communists on the other, the episode also finds its place in what Goldman calls the ‘tradition’ of adult education at Oxford: not in the sense of simply bracketing its diverse components together, but rather as a ‘lineage and historical succession’ of which each cohort in turn was conscious of forming a part. An increasing sensitivity to such lineages, overstepping the boundaries of denominational histories, can be detected in a variety of fields from the women’s suffrage movement to the ‘rise of Labour’. Of more immediate relevance, David Blaazer has depicted the wider popular front agitations of the 1930s as part of an older ‘progressive tradition’ rather than simply a tactic of the Comintern, while Stephen Woodhams has traced a Victorian tradition of ‘moral socialism’ through the communist milieu of the popular front period to the emergence of the first New Left. Where Blaazer’s concern is to rescue ‘progressivism’ from its entanglement with an undifferentiated body of communists, Woodhams represents an increasing body of scholarship sensitive to how similar considerations might also be brought to bear upon the communists themselves. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine on what other basis something like the emergence of the ‘first’ New Left could possibly be described.

Only a few illustrations of these lineages can be picked out here. One, largely unheralded by the communists themselves, was that of Fabianism. Scorned in the marxist ‘classics’ they studied, Fabianism was represented there as the creed of the ‘haughty bourgeoisie, graciously descending to the proletariat to liberate it from above’. Almost the only ex-Fabians within the party were former guild socialists who had revolted against the society’s founders, and even the pro-Bolshevik Bernard Shaw discredited himself by his endorsement of fascism and general political erraticism. In Christopher Caudwell’s Studies in a Dying Culture, published after Caudwell’s death in Spain, Shaw has pride of place as court jester to the decaying bourgeoisie, again corrupted by the vision of the expert ‘wielding the powers of the State for the “good” of the proletariat’. At worst—and the phrase is more applicable to Shaw than most—he was a ‘social fascist’,

Nevertheless, for communists of Caudwell’s generation Shaw was one of the most potent of intellectual influences. On the Manchester database he is mentioned as formative reading by over thirty individuals, a figure in excess of that for any other single author. Even the founders of marxism tend to be lost in references to the general impact of marxist ideas or reading programmes undertaken after joining the party. Shaw, however, was the very reverse of a canonical influence. Ted Ainsley used his name as his Lenin School pseudonym. Arthur Horner, who had named his first two daughters after Rosa Luxemburg and the anarchist Voltairine de Cleyre, named the third after Joan of Arc—following the West End triumph of Saint Joan. ‘We are all of us Shaw’s pupils’, wrote the Catholic apostate Bernal, and Shaw’s profoundly secular influence appealed particularly to those breaking free of ‘cant’ and religious indoctrination. To Bernal it was a ‘rational’ and ‘comprehensive’ view of the world as something to ‘control and improve’; and while even he did not endorse Shaw’s fascination with the ‘superman’, the hubris of the Bernalian scientist does now look like a variation on the Fabian cult of the expert.

Often linked with his fellow iconoclast H. G. Wells, Shaw’s appeal was as much to the autodidact as to the ‘expert’ intelligence. Moreover, unlike Wells, he was also identified with the constructive exposition of the socialist case and what on our evidence was the most influential work of socialist advocacy since the days of Blatchford. This was his Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Fascism, published in 1928 and expanded as the first Pelican selection in 1937. Nourishing as it did the ‘Pelican mind’, its appeal respected no boundaries except, in a paradoxical fashion, those of generation: for of the twenty-eight individuals with birth dates for whom we have noted Shaw as a formative influence, eighteen were born in the period 1903–14, and another four in 1918–21—over half a century after Shaw himself (born 1856), but growing up just in time to catch the first and updated editions of the book respectively. Without comparative research, it is impossible to establish whether Shaw’s ideas
were particularly conducive to communism or at least—for Mosley was another admirer—to the political extremes. It is suggestive, however, that of the handful of Hugh Jenkins's Putney Labour activists who belonged to the same generation, one of these too was converted to socialism ‘overnight’ when the Pelican Intelligent Woman’s Guide appeared.

Cutting across Shaw's image as the quintessential Edwardian who lived to see his ideas becoming out-of-date, this might again suggest the contemporaneity of what are habitually constructed as different generations. On the other hand, Shaw’s longevity and pro-Sovietism made him a special case. Although near-contemporaries of his like Morris and Blatchford are also described as formative influences, the context is almost invariably that of ideas picked up within the home, or else relates to an older generation, epitomised by Pollitt, whose politicisation predated the CPGB. Shaw’s significance is that he is described as a direct influence of his nearest rivals, at least among his contemporaries, those who were otherwise signed up to different, more 1930s’ communists than mention Laski, Strachey, Cole and Dutt put together. His nearest rivals, at least among political writers, were those other supernannuated gradualists the Webbs, whose Soviet Communism (1935) conveyed the current appeals of Stalinism in distinctly Fabian terms.

If Shaw’s appeal was to the critical intelligence, Soviet Communism also represented another strand feeding into British communism, namely the notion of ‘service’ or disinterested public activism with which both Fabianism and an idealised image of the USSR came to be associated. Raphael Samuel was foremost in showing how communism in this perspective represented a transmutation of religious ideas and practices either within the individual or across the generations. Victor K iernan, himself a Cambridge communist of nonconformist upbringing, wondered whether the social and political activism of his generation depended on this pervasive religious inheritance as one of its vital and irreplaceable ‘taproots’, though representing not much the teleology of secularisation as the reworking of a sense of mission. Certainly something like this appears to have been the inspiration for the collection Christianity and the Social Revolution, published by Gollancz in 1935. It may well be that the time has come for religion to dissolve like an insubstantial dream... dying to be born again as the Holy Spirit of a righteous social order’, wrote one of the co-editors, John Lewis. Four years later Lewis joined the communist party.

As a former unitarian minister, Lewis was one of those who personally experienced this rebirth. Among the others there were a number of practising ministers of religion, six in the 1960s, the majority of whom appear to have been Anglicans. Alan Ecclestone, the best known of them, had been strongly influenced by Conrad Noel's militant Anglo-Catholicism and joined the Labour Party in the 1920s even before he began training for the ministry. Practising a democratic but exacting form of church organisation influenced by G.D.H. Cole, he survived the departures of a succession of curates and joined the CPGB in 1948. Rare as was this particular form of dual membership, given Arthur Koestler’s perception of the CPGB as like a vicarage tea party, it was no doubt appropriate that the sons and daughters of assorted rectories should have figured quite prominently in its ranks. Of our interviewees, whose father was a curate in Hoxton and Nottinghamshire, even described herself in the terms of a cradle communist:

You see we were brought up as, I think you’d call it, Christian Socialists... It was something which you were not aware of learning, it was the atmosphere of your home and your life... the terrible conditions in London, the children in the wards and that sort of thing. You began to feel, oh well, it needs more than this to improve all this.... It was just a sort of natural next step for me.

Others who took this step, or something like it, included a number of intellectuals from the party’s early years. That Anthony Blunt was the son of an Anglican clergyman only seemed to compound his infamy, but so too were Randall Swingler, the poet, Daily Worker literary editor and godson of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the doyenne of the CPGB historians’ group, Dona Torr, whose father was a canon of Chester Cathedral. If Swingler, according to Andy Croft, carried into his literary communism elements of Christian Platonism, evangelical witness and ‘Wykehamist principles of service’, it seems more challenging to pick out even virtual continuities in Torr’s exegeses of historical materialism. Nevertheless, a subterranean passage can certainly be traced through to the histories and moralities of her protégés of the historians’ group, notably the most heavily indebted of all, E. P. Thompson, who in 1955 acknowledged Torr as his greatest support and intellectual mentor. For K iernan, Hill and Thompson among the historians, to say nothing of working-class leaders like Horner, Cox and Murphy, early religious influences were of a nonconformist character. Indeed, it was this dissenting tradition which Raphael Samuel particularly associated with the earnestness of communist party culture and its notions of the elect.
although they appear to have lacked the relative independence that allowed Anglicans like Noel, Ecclestone, Hewlett Johnson and R.W. Cummings to sow the seeds of communist commitments even from the pulpit. Born a year before Ecclestone in 1903, Bill Allen was in many ways his dissenting counterpart. He too had joined both the Labour Party and the ministry in the late 1920s, influenced by his father-in-law, a Bradford building union activist. Already disillusioned by Macdonald, and a student of Marx, MacMurray and the Webbs' Soviet Communism, Allen also resembles Ecclestone in having joined the CPGB in reaction to the ‘second great betrayal’ of the Attlee years. Unlike Ecclestone, however, Allen was forced from his pulpit by his Dulwich congregation, and though defiantly announcing his intention of preaching on ‘scientific’ rather than ‘supernatural’ lines, is soon to be found working for the party’s literature distributors. Ecclestone too was denied preferment, but not otherwise impeded in recruiting party members or modelling his parish magazine New Community on factory papers. Locality as well as demonization mattered: in areas with strong Labour movement traditions like South Wales and Lancashire, allegiances to chapel and party were not always incompatible, and references can be found to communist lay preachers like the Methodist Jack Abel, who recruited to the party its longstanding Lancashire district secretary Syd Abbott. In general, though, it seems that nonconformist preachers who thought religion an insubstantial dream did not remain preachers for long.

With socialism and collectivism exercising a pull for some forty years before the CPGB was thought of, inevitably there were parents or grandparents who had already thought their way out of religion and embraced a secular notion of progress and good works. Examples of these more considerable continuities were the brothers Roger and Brian Simon, whose parents Ernest and Shena Simon were leading civic benefactors and Liberal politicians in Manchester. They were also confirmed collectivists, eventually joining the Labour Party, and Ernest Simon attributed the commencement of his public career to the Webbs’ Poor Law Inquiry Report of 1908. Bringing up their children in an ‘atmosphere of public service’, and incidentally sending them to Gresham’s School, they instilled in them the idea of careers dedicated to these ends rather than the family’s engineering business. For Roger Simon, ‘the service of humanity’ led into work as a local government solicitor and the further Webbian step of producing the Local Government News Service of the LRD, which his father had supported financially in its Fabian inception. In 1950 he even defended the Webbs’ approach to local government in the pages of the Modern Quarterly, citing the ‘proud independence’ of the Victorian municipality and Sidney Webb’s programme for the Labour Party to defend the ‘fullest possible extension of democratically elected local bodies’ against the bureaucratic centralisation of the Attlee years.

Brian, no doubt inspired by his mother’s work on the Manchester education committee, pursued the same broad conception of the public good as a crusader for comprehensive education. Seemingly, these career options confirm the view that the welfare professions did not so much generate radical attitudes as attract those seeking ways in which to pursue them and thus, in the words of one communist teacher secure ‘a more organic mode of existence’.

Amidst these lineages, two features stand out. One is the significance of an idealised construction of the USSR for recruits from these backgrounds. Several joined the CPGB immediately after visiting the country. Dr Robert Dunstan, who defected from the Labour Party in 1924, was an early example. Others include Roger Simon, Robin Jardine, a former theological student turned towards socialism by work in the Gorbals, and Archibald Robertson, the secularist son of a bishop who joined at the age of fifty-two and proved unstinting in Stalinist apologetics. Even beyond the party, Christian publicists like the ‘red’ Dean of Canterbury, Hewlett Johnson, had an enormous influence over public perceptions of Stalin’s Russia. Pat Sloan, the most assiduous of such propagandists within the party’s ranks, shared many of the same influences. The son of a wealthy businessman, he first became interested in the USSR at Cambridge in the 1920s through his supervisor Maurice Dobb. As secretary of the university’s newly founded Marshall Society, then promoting ideas of communism and good works for distressed proletarians, Sloan was also drawn towards the Prometheus Society, an eclectic expression of unfocused youth revolt, and did not actually join the communist party until returning from a first spell of teaching in Russia in 1932. Once having taken the step, Sloan was one of those whose commitment for the time being was total. Far from taking a form of Platonism into the party, he used the pages of the New Statesman to defend the banning of contemporary exhibitions of idealism and the ‘antiquated pre-scientific philosophy’ of Plato himself. Subsequently, when John Lewis presented Soviet morality in terms of ‘honourable service rather than gain’, it was Sloan who rebuked him with the new Stalinist orthodoxy legitimising personal wealth and success as the basis of human effort.

Sloan also illustrates a second feature of many of these recruits, namely that of delayed recruitment. In Sloan’s case, like Robertson’s, this was clearly linked with exposure to the stronger attraction of Soviet communism. ForCold War recruits like Allen and Ecclestone, the context...
was the open breach between British Labour and Soviet communism, so that Ecclestone joined directly as a result of Labour’s condemnation of the ‘Prague coup’ in February 1948.\(^{195}\) Both Allen and Ecclestone had been strongly pro-Soviet since at least the 1930s, Ecclestone even forming a branch of the FSU, and the perceived incompatibility of such views with the post-war Labour Party provided the CPGB with a number of recruits and reinforced the sharper divide now existing between social democracy and communism. In this sense, ‘delayed’ recruitment may be contrasted with ‘natural’ processes of recruitment commonly favouring the Labour Party. In other cases, however, delayed recruitment reflected the more accommodating attitudes or policies adopted by the CPGB itself. Roger Simon, for example, had been put off by the communists’ rough handling of Labour speakers when he went to Cambridge in 1932, and did not join until he too visited Russia three years later.\(^{196}\)

Ivor Montagu, another example, was a lifelong Fabian and a less untypical one than he possibly realised. Unselfconsciously in his memoirs, he recounted his early missionary activities on behalf of table tennis—a sport ‘particularly suited to the lower paid… in crowded towns’—as well as his own more expansive enthusiasm for cricket. Well known for his patrician accent and demeanour, he once turned up at the Daily Worker threatening an exposé of Harrods’ food prices.\(^{197}\) Whatever Clydebank Riveter would have made of that, as a former BSP member who had undertaken not to spend his parental allowance on politics until he came of age, Montagu nevertheless waited another six years before joining the CPGB at the end of 1931.\(^{198}\)

An appreciation of impediments and delays offers insights into the overall trajectory of party membership as well as the movements of individuals. Although Annie Kriegel also identified generation as a primary form of stratification within the communist movement, the sole determining factor she identified in the crystallisation of different generations, and implicitly in the making of different cohorts of communists, was the fluctuating strategy and policy of the Comintern.\(^{199}\) Once it is accepted, however, that party membership was not ‘determined’ at all, then it is evident that without a degree of convergence between these strategies and the desires and expectations of potential recruits, the communists of these different generations would not have been communists in the first place. The CPGB’s changing positions with regard to women, intellectuals, perhaps also to Christians, brings this out clearly in the lives of particular individuals as well as in wider patterns of recruitment. In a more general sense too, the party managed for a time to stake a claim to some of the territory and lineages of the old activist left, whether defined in political or industrial terms. Politically, it attempted rather self-consciously to take on the campaigning functions of earlier activist parties. Industrially, Richard Croucher and Nina Fishman have shown how the CPGB’s influence among the lay officers providing the sinews of British trade unionism always reflected a degree of adaptation to the movement’s diverse conventions.\(^{200}\) One result of this is that significant populations can be identified moving into the CPGB, sometimes without any marked sense of personal discontinuity and with ‘delays’, whether individual or collective, representing a complex process in which radicalisation and the blockage to its expression elsewhere combined with the increasing viability of the CPGB itself as a vehicle for such commitments.

The ragged-trousered revolutionaries

Different lineages linked with different party cultures, and we have seen how a sensitivity to such issues provides a necessary corrective to presentations of British communism in purely monolithic terms. On the other hand, the key to the communists’ effectiveness, and to the very notion that they shared a common political ‘heyday’, is that communism for a period brought these different strands together within a distinctive political culture marked by a strong sense of purposiveness, cohesion and mutual affinity. The CPGB functioned not just as a party ‘comme les autres’, but as ‘the’ party to its members, and with whatever degree of conditionality and elasticity, the diverse recruitments to the party in the 1930s and 1940s all found at least a temporary political resting place there. In 1952, when the party organised a conference on Britain’s cultural heritage, it was revealing of the separate worlds of British communism that only one ‘industrial comrade’ should have spoken, and should have described his Yorkshire ‘mining comrades’ as ‘staggered’ that he should want to do so. On the other hand, it was just as revealing that he should have turned up at all, challenging Hollywood gangsterism with the achievements of the miners’ bands—‘while their selections… may not be progressive, they are certainly open to transformation’—and amateur productions of The Gondoliers. Condescendingly or deferentially, the intellectuals gathered before him will certainly have indicated their approval.\(^{201}\)

Raphael Samuel identified an affinity between a communist cadre ‘bringing understanding from outside to the people’ and a Fabian public-service ethic, planning and administering to the ‘common good’.\(^{202}\) We have seen that working-class communists did not necessarily have this sense of coming to ‘the people’ from outside, indeed, were unusually
behind such frustration. 'The way the bosses, parasites, rentiers, landlords and royalty now rub our noses in it! It is an insult, and I, for one, wonder time and time again how we can allow it to go on.'

A world away from the uplift of socialist realism, The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists was described by Samuel as a ‘deeply pessimistic work’, identifying socialists as a dissenting minority, isolated, embattled and with a distinct sense of mission setting them apart from their fellows.

Despite its proletarian allure, it conveyed the image of the socialist as at one with, and yet distinct from, the larger body of the British working class. This was an aspect of the work about which Samuel wrote brilliantly, linking it with the ‘protestant’ culture setting the communists apart as a ‘peculiar people’. Nevertheless, Tressell’s wider popularity with Labour movement activists suggests that this was also a shared peculiarity, reaching back, as Samuel showed, to the Owenites, and embracing every radical social movement showing the same ‘will to lead’ and presumption to the right of leadership. More than that, where Samuel saw affinities, there were bound to be hidden connections and trajectories too. It is this recognition that finally serves to qualify and historicise those suggestions of communism as a complete, distinct and self-contained social identity with which we began our account, and locate it as we would locate any political movement, within the sources of its own recruitment.
communist parties in which the British case represents a relatively high level of interaction with a variety of radical and labour movement milieux.\(^2\) Communism was nothing if not a political formation of international scope, and we have seen how its forms of leadership, organisation and political identity were shaped accordingly. Nevertheless, the influence of its diverse sources of recruitment and fields of activity was not simply negated by the act of joining the party, but helped determine both its patterns of adhesion and defection and the character of the relationship which party membership represented. The ‘complex transaction’ we have traced between member and party was an ongoing one in which the balance between different issues of social and political identity was subject to incalculable variations, in each case shifting over time.

If any single motif is closest to capturing this sense of continuous flux and remaking, it is that of generation. Overlapping, indeterminate and continuously interactive, generation not only provides a clue to difference within the communist party, but helps locate the party as a whole within a number of competing historical narratives. At one level it conveys the sense of a distinct generational experience, or set of experiences, defined by the ideological and organisational imperatives of Bolshevism and the positing of a fundamental cleavage in the politics of the left arising from the Russian Revolution. At an institutional level, it reinforces the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of the individual conversion narrative with a larger generational barrier separating communism as a movement from its predecessors and successors, as well as the alternative traditions, ongoing or ‘suppressed’, sometimes held to have seamlessly linked them. In Britain, Walter Kendall’s account of the CPGB’s origins remains the strongest version of this interpretation, stressing not just the obvious fact of a rupture but its total character: the turning of a movement ‘inside out’, switching it round by ‘one hundred and eighty degrees’, marching its members off ‘in the opposite direction’ and leaving no political legacy for those who came after. The communist party, wrote Kendall, ‘supplanted one tradition without in any sense implanting another’. Its members, already in 1921, were not human beings but ‘puppets’.\(^3\)

At the general level of Kendall’s revolutionary ‘line of march’, the character and dating of this rupture may be argued out indefinitely. If, on the other hand, we apply the concept of generation prosopographically, then we also need a sense of the cohort after cohort which had still in 1921 to negotiate their terms of entry into this narrative. As we have seen, they did so in the most varied circumstances, and at different stages in their own diverse life histories. Rather than a line of march, the routes into, through, and often out of, the communist party resemble one of
those dilatory British May Day processions, with contingents arriving at different times, bands playing different tunes, and marchers singing Pie in the Sky or Casey Jones in their ignorance of the words of the Internationale. ‘When we are assembled in Hyde Park, the ridiculous smallness of our demonstration becomes evident; and no wonder it is small; such organisation as there has been breaks down entirely, the resolution is put at different times from the different platforms, and the bands, with the remains of their various contingents, take the first opportunity to slip shamefacedly away.’

Dating from 1924, this was the account of a young ‘old’ Etonian, Arthur Reade, whose own peregrinations led through enthusiasms for Trotsky and Ramsay MacDonald’s National Labour breakaway, before settling into a more conventional existence as a colonial magistrate. Whatever one wants to make of such a career, it was hardly that of a puppet.

In closing with the reminder of mutability, there is a final, biographical essentialism to be avoided which would string these affiliations together as the disparate emanations of a single fixed personality. In Britain, as we have seen, communists themselves often preferred such ‘continuity’ narratives as a way of embedding themselves in a wider progressive tradition; at the level both of the individual and the institution, far less was made of communism as an ‘existential watershed’ than was true of some other European parties. A Labour Monthly obituary of the composer Rutland Boughton put it succinctly: Boughton had remained the ‘same man’ as a Cold War peace campaigner in Warsaw as on first being stirred to political consciousness by reading Ruskin and Morris half a century earlier.

Belied and yet complemented by the notion of the ‘backslider’ or ‘traitor’, the continuity narrative here served as a way of claiming Ruskin and Morris themselves for communism, glossing over the reshaping of the individual and the profound effect of the times in which Boughton lived. And yet again, if not entirely the same man, Boughton was certainly not a different one. Joining the CPGB in 1926, he proclaimed as communism’s ‘real leaders’ not just Ruskin and Morris, but Plato, Jesus, Hardie and Bernard Shaw; and with his long-haired, ‘aristocratic’ variant of ethical communism had left, rejoined and left again by the time of his death in 1960. For another communist composer, Alan Bush, who in 1924 succeeded Boughton as conductor of the London Labour Choral Union, communism was a more transformative experience involving the remaking of his creative identity and blockages to a promising career offset only by the compensatory patronage of the GDR. Both were communists and anti-modernists, devotees of Soviet cultural policy unmoved by the hounding of their Russian counterparts. But between Boughton, repeatedly adjusting and readjusting his commitments, and Alan Bush, who could never have left the CPGB and before his death in 1995 could not even leave behind the image of the USSR he could scarcely comprehend having collapsed, one has an impression of the range of possible experiences even within the narrowest subcategories. Neither is more representative than the other; but it is the recognition of complexity, not monolithicity, which alone can encompass both.

Reade’s dream of a better May Day was that of a disciplined marching order, the synchronised rendition of revolutionary anthems, and the declamation of common texts in the several languages of the workers, including Esperanto. Like Esperanto itself, in Britain at least things never quite happened this way. Nevertheless, if one stood back a little, or took the sort of aerial perspective that was just then becoming possible, the marchers in Reade’s picture seem a very definite entity: huddled together in the vastness of the park, trailing away at the edges, occasionally attracting the curious, but easily distinguished from the footballers and picnickers surrounding them. Over the years, the composition of the crowd gradually changes, and numbers contract and distend, though some it seems are unable to keep away. The slogans on the placards vary, not only across the decades, but sometimes from year to year; though there is also something distinctive about the language used, as well as the carrying it about above one’s head. Between their coming together in a common purpose, and their straggling away to pursue that purpose in their diverse walks of life, we get a glimpse, not perhaps of the communist party alone, but of some of the wider characteristics of left-wing political activism in twentieth-century Britain.
other academics who pronounce on such issues. Symptomatic at once of a sense of election and a highly literate political culture, communists' ability to articulate a sense of self, or at least of their public selves, was if anything rather pronounced.

Albeit to a much lesser degree, similar considerations even apply to the short ‘institutional’ or ‘cadre’ autobiographies of British communists which provided us with a second major biographical source. As a record of a substantial body of non-elite British political activists, these appear to be unique. Based on practices already established in the USSR, the compilation of such biographies was generalised throughout the Comintern during the 1930s, and by 1938 the CPGB had collected some five hundred of them. After briefly falling into abeyance, their collection then recommenced in earnest in 1941–2 and about three thousand personal files dating from this period until the mid-1960s are held with the CPGB archives in Manchester. Though some of the earlier files were consulted by us in the Comintern archives, most of these were not immediately accessible to researchers. While benefitting from summary information derived from them by Peter Huber, our own research was mainly based on the biographies in Manchester.

Internationally, access to such sources has given rise to a flourishing literature in which reference has again been made to the standardised forms of the biographies, ‘designed to comply not to subjective experience, but with what was felt to be the linearly correct political development of a militant party member’. This was encouraged by the questionnaire format used, including sections on social background, education, occupation, political responsibilities and affiliations and past or present differences with the party. Quite apart from the homogenising effect of such a format, the inception of the biographies as a tool of political control also served as possible constraint. In Britain, it was hardly coincidental that the first bulge of them should have coincided with the aftermath of the Moscow trials and the Comintern’s preoccupation with ‘Trotskyist’ penetration. Similarly, the post-war peak of the early 1950s occurred against the backdrop of a new wave of show trials and heightened ‘revolutionary vigilance’ in the matter of appointments, transfers, recruitment and the readmission of lapsed members. In France, the biographies from this latter period, i.e. corresponding to the ones which we consulted, are said to have become more intrusive and policiér even by comparison with the 1930s. In 1953, a British respondent whose membership had been broken by a spell in the Labour Party described it as ‘strange, even menacing’ to be asked for a biography amidst a ‘mysterious silence’ as to its purpose and potential uses.

A NOTE ON METHODS AND SOURCES

Research for this book was based on contemporary party archives and political texts and the reading and recording of communist life histories. All sources drawn upon directly are indicated in the footnotes. Very occasionally an identity has been suppressed for reasons of privacy or confidentiality. A few of the ‘additional’ (non-project) interviews, along with notes and correspondence received by the Manchester project, are not currently accessible in any archive. With these exceptions, all our sources are open to researchers and can be checked in the usual way.

Two features of the research were of particular importance for an enquiry of the scope and character of that attempted here. The first, which gave rise to the idea of the project in the first place, was the availability of a range of biographical sources probably without parallel in respect of other British political parties. In addition to our own project interviews, numbering nearly a hundred, and summaries of other interviews recorded for the Manchester project, life-history materials consulted included nearly seventy further oral interviews and a similar number of published or unpublished autobiographies. Space precludes detailed discussion of the character of these testimonies and the diverse forms and contexts in which they were constructed. Nevertheless, if an immediate generalisation is allowable, it is that stock references to the diffidence of communist narrators, or to the depersonalised, sometimes third-person narrative forms into which they fell, need very considerable modification in respect of our own research. In part, this may be due to timing: compared with interviews of our own from the 1980s, even the same interviewees were often less constrained by a shared party loyalty and sense of discipline and more reflective about what the commitment to communism had meant in their lives. Although we have not carried out the necessary comparative research, we should be very surprised to discover that these communist lives were more standardised and anonymous than those of most other social groups, not excluding ourselves and
doubt it tells us something of the relationship between member and party that the right of the latter to collect such information was so widely accepted. Though clearly this offers insights into the political culture of Stalinism, the usefulness of the biographies for any wider historical purpose might seem to be correspondingly weakened.

At least in Britain, however, it is difficult to regard the biographies as instruments of ‘an almost perfect system of surveillance’. In the post-war period, despite the correlation between ‘vigilance’ and the numbers collected, the biographies were usually generated through attendance at party schools or in applying for full-time positions rather than for expressly disciplinary purposes. Whereas in France and Italy they were collected even on transfer from one party district to another, procedures in Britain were less systematic and no biography appears to have been held at King Street for many established functionaries and industrial cadres for whom no specific occasion for one had arisen. Again in contrast to France, where it gave rise to public scandals and the neologism bioter, the practice was little remarked upon by party members, and none of our interviewees spontaneously mentioned it. Though respondents were asked to detail differences with the party, there was no question concerning family or personal connections with suspect elements, including police and ‘members of enemy parties’, such as can be found in the pre-war French questionnaires. Consequently, even for a member of the CPGB’s inner circle like Emile Burns, who certainly had such associations, no document recording this information appears to have been held by the party in Britain; for real intrusiveness, including tapped telephone conversations and intercepted correspondence of an entirely private character, one has to go to the files now being released which MI5 held at King Street for many established functionaries and industrial cadres for whom no specific occasion for one had arisen. Again in contrast to France, where it gave rise to public scandals and the neologism bioter, the practice was little remarked upon by party members, and none of our interviewees spontaneously mentioned it. Though respondents were asked to detail differences with the party, there was no question concerning family or personal connections with suspect elements, including police and ‘members of enemy parties’, such as can be found in the pre-war French questionnaires. Consequently, even for a member of the CPGB’s inner circle like Emile Burns, who certainly had such associations, no document recording this information appears to have been held by the party in Britain; for real intrusiveness, including tapped telephone conversations and intercepted correspondence of an entirely private character, one has to go to the files now being released which MI5 maintained on behalf of a liberal democracy. In a famous intervention in 1929, the Comintern functionary M anuilsky complained of practices like deviation-hunting having to be ‘forcibly injected’ into the CPGB, which adhered to them only for form’s sake. On the basis of his German experiences, Arthur Koestler noted with bewilderment the failure of the CPGB’s ‘lotus-eaters’ to root out heresy. It is certainly remarkable that in the aftermath of the 1930s’ purges the CPGB should report to Moscow that its vetting of district committees had unearthed ‘no single case of ‘politically unreliable elements’.

The result for historians is a less controlled and formulaic body of testimonies than might have been anticipated. Detailing his early family responsibilities, one respondent noted that he ‘put that in because I believe it had a great effect on my life’. Though an evaluation of what went in and what stayed out must again await another opportunity, enough was included to provide an illuminating body of testimonies, particularly regarding formative influences and experiences and the tensions between personal and political commitments that the life of an activist involved. For the present project, we consulted around a third of the files held in M anchester. These comprised the opening alphabetical sequence (A-G), those for members holding executive-level positions or having attended the Lenin School, and a random selection of the remaining files.

Information from these and a wide range of other sources was stored on the biographical database which provided the other distinctive feature of the research. Occasionally referred to in the text as the M anchester database, the immediate rationale for constructing such a tool was a modest and pragmatic one. We were under no illusion as to how the use of computers for similar projects had become associated with the fetishisation of ‘aggregates’, flattening out the category of experience and reducing complex actors to the common denominator of the measurable unit. We not only shared these reservations, but were mindful of Luisa Passerini’s observation that what appears unique in personal accounts is often what throws most light on shared values and cultural stereotypes, and which risks being obliterated by the method and mindset of the questionnaire. Specifically in the field of communist historiography, we also took note of how a previous survey like Harvey Klehr’s had focused on ‘party-career data’ and the detailing of Soviet connections in a manner seemingly predetermining the construction of a ‘total’ party member. Our own research goals were both more ambitious and more exploratory, and no quantitative method of which we are aware can capture the complexity of the multiple, interacting roles and relationships whose significance in the formation of political identities we found attested in the individual life histories. Wary of these obvious methodological pitfalls, at the most basic level we therefore envisaged a structured qualitative database which would involve no restriction on the range and depth of qualitative information recorded but simply help us get at it more easily.

Continuously enhanced in the course of writing these chapters, there was no sense in which the database, like the research itself, could ever be ‘complete’. No attempt was made to identify a representative sample of communists. Even had we had access to the sort of prefiltered census data allowing Paul Thompson to identify a quota sample for his pioneering E dwardians, multidimensional lines of differentiation meant that there were no simple criteria by which such a sample could have been identified. Not so much constrained by the unevenness of our sources
as wishing to take advantage of it, we recorded information without restriction to any sub-population, along with the source of data to allow the identification of biases. As well as ‘party-career data’, this included information as to personal, religious, political, cultural or industrial associations, maintained either before or concurrently with communist party membership. As far as were able, we recorded this information for those who went ‘through’ the CPGB as well as ‘into’ it, at different levels and in different spheres of activity, and with details where available of their subsequent histories. Although this partly reflected our interest in communist identities, the CPGB’s relatively weak institutional presence also meant that members’ status, influence and level of activity did not necessarily correspond to their positions in the party hierarchy, and that this correspondence declined over time with significant consequences for the party’s internal functioning. If we did not just focus on the communist party elite, it was because this too needed to be identified on the basis of research sensitive to the informalities as well as the trappings of power.

Consequently, we avoided the limitations of the classic survey method based on a predetermined population and set of questions, and were free to develop new lines or subjects of enquiry as the research progressed. By the time we completed the manuscript, we had recorded information for around 4,500 communists. The density of coverage ranges from around a seventh of the CPGB’s members for the membership nadir of 1930–1, to around 6 per cent with rising membership by the time of the Second World War and 2–3 per cent for the peak membership years of the 1940s. Because of the source-based nature of our research, the information in many cases is fragmentary, sometimes relating to a single aspect of an individual’s life. Fuller profiles—here taken as including some basic details of work, residence and political activities—existed for just over half of the total. The corresponding figures for density of coverage are just over a tenth for 1930–1, falling to just under 5 per cent in 1939 to a low point of 1.7 per cent in 1942. At the other end of the scale, information extracted from fuller sources like our own unstructured project interviews, or from sometimes in excess of twenty different sources, could amount to as much as five thousand words of summary and transcription. Though this was unusual, in something over a thousand cases at least two hundred words of free text was added, in addition to the basis descriptive details of work, residence, organisation affiliations, etc.

Even as a secondary source, the database was not our only quarry of information, and in text and notes we make no distinction between material collected for the Manchester project and that accumulated over a much longer period. Where the database itself was of inestimable value was in the greatly enhanced ability it gave us to compare testimonies relating to similar issues and areas of activity. We were certainly alert to the significance of subjectivities and individual trajectories, for it was precisely this dimension that we found missing in much existing communist historiography. On the other hand, it seemed just as clear that the very concept of a stereotype or common system of values, including those implicit in any claim of representativeness for the individual case, is one incapable of being demonstrated except at some level of aggregation, even if lacking precision or being rendered in prose. Whenever such general claims are made—‘communists and British society’, or Passerini’s ‘cultural experience of the Turin working class’—the issue is therefore posed, not just of the recognition of subjectivities, but of how particular subjectivities are inscribed with a wider significance, whether explicitly or by selection and accentuation. Specifically in relation to the CPGB, Raphael Samuel’s New Left Review articles, though a source of inspiration to us, are very much a case in point. Brilliantly allusive and insightful, they include a host of generalisations collapsing authentic subjectivities and snapshots into a vivid group portrait by which always some other subjectivity is potentially denied. Our concern was therefore not just with what Samuel and Paul Thompson in Their Lives by called the ‘variety of experience in any social group’, but with the social group itself as the product of a classification or self-classification which is never, in a complex society, an exclusive one. Indeed, what the variety of experience represents is itself, from another aspect, simply the existence of these multiple forms of identity cutting across the seeming unicity—if we can adopt the French expression—of the group in question.

Such issues are easily enough conceptualised, and have been admirably summarised by Thompson himself. In practice, however, a common difficulty in overcoming the divide between life-history and survey-based methods has been the reliance of qualitative researchers on wider surveys carried out independently according to far more limited research criteria. Specifically in the field of communist historiography, even so outstanding an account as Barbara Evans Clements’s Bolshevik Women has more the character of a parallel narrative than a genuine cross-referencing between the two approaches. We were therefore fortunate in being able to think from the start in terms of a mixed-methods approach for which we alone were collectively responsible. This allowed us to collect biographical information in such ways and from such sources that exceptionality was not denied, while permitting the grouping and comparative evaluation of this information to explore shared values and
behaviour. Conceived as a way of anchoring, validating and sometimes undermining qualitative assessments—in the words of Thompson and his colleagues, ‘checking our hunches’—we also found that exploratory searches could suggest new hypotheses, problems or lines of enquiry, sending us back to the individual histories and forcing us to confront anomalies and counter-subjectivities we might otherwise have overlooked.

Findings from across the database are presented in a variety of ways. Simple statements that we have identified groups of cases sharing particular characteristics have no quantitative significance either in absolute terms or as a proportion of CPGB members, but simply give an indication of significant shared experiences that can sometimes be linked in other ways; for example, where we cite and collectively evaluate the multiple cases we identified of communists influenced by authors Bernard Shaw and Erich Maria Remarque. The same caveat is even more necessary in the case of issues like motivations for joining the CPGB, which are the product of our own classifications on the basis of widely differing sources of information. On the other hand, there are other classes of information which we have been able to record with greater precision, for example sex, specific political responsibilities or dates of birth, death and of joining or leaving the CPGB. Even in these cases, the data collected remains deeply problematic from a quantitative point of view, with the likelihood of extreme forms of bias resulting from the extent of missing and skewed data and the lack of a representative sample. However, in many respects these were far from unique and we were able to adapt techniques developed for the quantitative examination of such problematic data used in other disciplines, notably medicine. As a result, on issues like the comparative recruitment to the CPGB of men and women, the effects in party careers of distinct experiences like attendance at the Lenin School and the age and longevity of membership of those who left the CPGB in 1956–7, our mixed-methods approach combines a rigorous quantitative analysis with qualitative research. Even where this was not practicable, the sheer quantity of information collected meant that the database provided an invaluable check on the plausibility of our ‘hunches’. Although the full version we used is not currently accessible, and is restricted by undertakings as to confidentiality, details of findings presented in the book can be accessed at our project website.

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Chapter 1

COMMUNISTS AND BRITISH SOCIETY

The Sociology of British Communism

Sociology

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24 Calhoun, 159.


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33 K. Riegl, French Communists, 235.

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Chapter 1

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539
COMMUNISTS AND BRITISH SOCIETY


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49 In May 1939, when Pollitt offered his resignation over the Comintern's imposition of a change of line on conscription, Kerrigan and Jessop were two of only four central committee members to support his position.

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1 Bell to Lenin, 14 August 1921.
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2 For this and other references in the afterword, readers are referred to our introduction.

3 K rendall, Revolutionary M ovement, 300-1.

4 W orkers' W eekly, 12 February 1926; H anlon and Waite, 'Notes from the left', 74.


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8 Stu der and U nfried, ‘T he beginning’, 422.

9 Claude P ennettier and Bernard P udal, ‘La “verification”. L'encadrement biographique communiste dans l’entre-deux-guerres’ (paper kindly supplied by the authors).

10 I nprocr, 25 August 1929, 1140.


13 C P/ Cen t/ Pers/ 2/ 1, G eorge B aker.


15 Passerini, Fascism in Popular M orality, 8.

16 K lehr, Communist Cadre, 16-17 and passim.

17 For a very helpful discussion of these issues, which suggested a number of parallels with our own work, see Gill G orell B arnes, Paul T hompson, G wyn D aniel and N atasha B urchardt; Growing UP in Stepfamilies, Oxford: O UP, 1998, ch. 2.


19 The database itself took several months to design while we revised its structure to make sure that it could accommodate all the information we wished to record from a project interview or autobiography. T his included details where available of dress, accent, home and domestic environment etc., as well as political and cultural attitudes. T he one significant omission we became aware of having made was of any separate record of personal health.

20 In absolute terms, there is a peak coverage of just over 1,200 members for the years 1945 and 1948-50.

21 On this see K evin M organ, ‘Parts of people and communist lives’ in M cIlroy et al., Party People, Communist Lives.

22 Samuel and T hompson, ‘Introduction’.


24 Barnes, G idon et al., Growing UP in Stepfamilies, 43.


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The following interviews were recorded as part of the University of Manchester CPGB Biographical Project between 1999 and 2001. The interviewers were Alan Campbell, Gidon Cohen, Andrew Flinn, Francis King, John Mclroy, Kevin Morgan, Neil Rafiek, Mike Squires and Richard Stevens. The great majority of these recordings are accessible to researchers in the National Sound Archive. The listing provided here comprises only those interviews or interview summaries directly drawn upon in the drafting of the present account.

Additional interviews

We have also drawn upon a large number of interviews recorded by other projects or for other purposes. The following listing provides the date of interview and name of interviewer, if known. Where appropriate, the place of deposit is indicated in parenthesis.

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Sam Apter

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Wollstonecraft, Mary, 181
Woman Today, 167
Women’s Campaign against War and Fascism, 167
Women’s International Council of Socialist and Labour Organisations, 154
women’s liberation movement, 129, 146, 179-83; see also feminism
women’s parliaments, 170, 171
Women’s Social and Political Union, 170
women’s suffrage movement, 134, 153-4, 177, 252
Woodhams, John, 23, 24
Woods, Charlie, 116
woodworkers and furnishing trades, 94, 159, 189, 233, 258
Woolf, Virginia, 181
Woolley, Ernie, 116, 118-19, 236
Workers’ Circle, 192
Workers’ Educational Association (WEA), 91, 261
Workers’ International Relief (WIR), 167-8
Workers’ Legion, 118-19
Workers’ Socialist Federation (WSF), 70, 153-4, 155, 156, 158, 164, 238
Workers’ Weekly, 237
World Congress of Women Against War and Fascism, 170
World News and Views, 121
Worsley, Peter, 225
Wythenshawe, 174
Yorkshire: coalfield, 41, 269; communist party, 90, 119; West Riding, 47, 157, 181, 256; communist party, 38, 46, 116, 161; YCL, 42
Young, Harry, 164
Young Communist International (YCI), 164, 227, 238
Young Communist League (YCL), 21, 23, 24, 32-3, 35, 36, 42, 53, 87, 97, 115, 121, 131, 134-5, 141, 149, 159, 161, 164, 179, 182, 190-1, 193, 194, 227, 236-8, 239, 241-2, 247, 252
Yugoslavia, 213; youth railway see also Tito/ Titoism
Zaidman, Lazar, 117, 192
Zetkin, Clara, 154, 198
Zhdanovism, see USSR, cultural policies
Zionism, 195-6