

REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

University of Michigan Project on International Communism

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It is surprising, given the recent flourishing of research on individual Communist parties and the interest sparked by both the national and international dimensions of Eurocommunism in the 1970s, that we remain so ignorant about the international dimensions of the Communist tradition. This is especially true of the Communist International itself. For a reliable guide to the basic political and organizational history of the Comintern we are still dependent on E. H. Carr's volumes and a handful of more specialized works. This paucity of serious scholarship has partly to do with the difficulties of gaining access to essential sources, because the Comintern archive, where individual Communist parties were also supposed to deposit their official Comintern-related documentation, remains closed in Moscow. But research on the various CPs has already turned up an impressive amount of relevant material (either from the parties' own archives, or from private collections, or from government records of surveillance), and it is striking how reluctantly historians have turned from the national back to the international dimensions of Communist history.

After a period in the 1950s and 1960s when the cold war and its legacies encouraged a simplistic conspiratorial view of the Comintern as the instrument for imposing Soviet policies on the affiliated CPs, we seem to have gone to an opposite extreme, in which the coherence and constructive contribution of the Comintern has dissolved in the intensive exploration of individual parties' autonomies. Motivated partly by anti-Stalinism, partly by embarrassment over the evidence of Comintern subservience to Soviet foreign policy, particularly after 1928, recent historians have basically conceded the ground to the cold war interpretation and have retreated into the safer refuge of national Communist party history. The recent emphasis in such research has been on the national roots of individual CPs, on the popular legitimacy of their grass-roots

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appeal, on the place of party activists in working-class communities, and in general on the national as opposed to the international determinants of party behavior. Recent work on the Italian, French, British, American, and German Communist parties has taken this direction, as has the growing body of literature on the parties of the Far East, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and other parts of the Third World. This work has certainly attained enviable standards of empathy and sophistication. But at the same time it may run the risk of discarding the baby with the bathwater. An intense identification with and loyalty to the Soviet Union was a defining feature of the Communist political tradition right from the start, in even the most independently minded of national parties, and until the new Communist history reconnects its insights to the international arena of Communist activity, the analysis of this crucial period of working-class history will necessarily remain incomplete.

It is to begin remedying this situation that Geoff Eley and Ron Suny, with the generous support of the University of Michigan, have initiated a long-term project on the international history of the Communist movement. As a first step in this endeavor, a small symposium convened in Ann Arbor on November 15, 1985, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the popular front line adopted by the Seventh Congress of the Third International. Sponsored by the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs of the University of Michigan, the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies, the Department of History, and the Center for Russian and East European Studies, the all-day meeting was attended by faculty and students of the university, invited participants, and guests from other academic institutions. The symposium was introduced by Ron Suny, who stressed the importance of situating discussion of the Comintern in the context of developments inside the Soviet Union in the 1930s, a possibility presently being opened up in exciting new ways by students of the Stalinist period. Recent investigations of the 1930s have challenged the monolithic, totalitarian image of Soviet state and society presented in earlier works and have argued that the Soviet state was far weaker, less well-organized, and less able to carry out its commands than previously imagined. Stalin's own autocratic control of the party-state was not fully achieved until the middle of the decade, and at the crucial moment of the change in the Comintern line other major figures played key roles in formulating international Communist policy.

The morning sessions, chaired by Roman Szporluk of the University of Michigan, then moved into a discussion of papers by Geoff Eley and Irwin Wall (University of California, Riverside) on the historiography of the Comintern and the nature of the popular front in France respectively. Eley reviewed the existing literature in Western languages on the history of Communism, noting the neglect of the role of the Comintern in the most recent work. Without subscribing to the view that manipulation from above constituted the

major determinant of national CP policies, Eley argued that the Comintern's influence must be reintegrated back into national histories. Certainly initiatives came from outside the ECCI, most relevantly here the French role in the formation of the popular front line, but soon after the Seventh Congress in July 1935 the debate seems to have closed and the ECCI passed under the tutelage of the NKVD. "The interesting question here is how far the Comintern *as such* contributed constructively to the national Communist departures. My own sense is that in the popular front it did so mainly by temporarily tolerating a space from which certain independently minded individuals like Dimitrov and Togliatti could provide a supportive international lead." He concluded the paper with suggestions for an agenda of further investigation.

Irwin Wall's paper, "The PCF and the Popular Front," attempted to transcend the debate over the motivations and the hidden determinants of the French party's strategies in the 1930s. "What the party hoped to accomplish in the long run may be less important than what it could do in the short term." The popular front strategy proper, the alliance of the Left, was pursued only briefly by the PCF, from 1934 to 1936, after which a national front strategy (*Front français*) was adopted. In part as a consequence of the success of the broad strategic combinations, the PCF developed an internal Stalinist organization which enabled an oligarchy drawn from the working class to perpetuate its bureaucratic control. Wall explored the PCF's colonial policy as an example of the kinds of adjustments made by the Communists to maintain the alliances forged after 1936. "The lesson of the Popular Front for the PCF," Wall concluded, "has been the lesson of democratic politics in general. In order to be successful the party must reflect the national consensus on a whole range of issues, many of which might be antithetical to the strategy of the moment if not to party ideology in the long run." Comments on the first two papers were made by Helmut Gruber (Polytechnic University).

After a break for lunch, Raymond Grew (University of Michigan) opened the afternoon sessions. Adrian Shubert (York University) presented his paper "Electoral Coalition, *Alianza Obrera*, Popular Front: The Unities of the Left in Spain, 1934–1936." Shubert argued that "the Popular Front which emerged in Spain bore little resemblance to its French counterpart and even less to the model designed by the Comintern. It owed little to the Spanish Communist party (PCE). Rather it was very much the creation of the Republicans, and especially former Prime Minister Manuel Azana, and the centre group of the Socialist party (PSOE) led by Indalecio Prieto." This broad electoral coalition, formed in January 1936, was only one of several formulas for unity of left and democratic parties, and Shubert traced the intricate bargaining that produced the 1936 alliance and eliminated the more exclusive *Alianza Obrera*. The popular front coalition of republicans and the left ultimately failed "because it was predicated on the unsound assumption that a 'reasonable' right would accept moderate reform as the price of avoiding revolution. However,

the Spanish right was not reasonable. Rather than make any sacrifice it preferred to resort to armed force." Shubert's paper was followed by remarks by Joseph Halevy, who had worked in the Central Committee of the Italian Communist party.

Summary remarks were made by Eric J. Hobsbawm (New School for Social Research), who dealt with the popular front experience both from personal knowledge and his own research and writing. Beginning with the "Third Period," Hobsbawm said that there was real support among politically-conscious workers and party cadres for the "class against class" line and resistance to changing it in the mid-1930s. In much of Europe militant workers maintained sympathy for the Soviet Union until 1947; even in France, where there was a chauvinist working class, the workers tended to identify their chauvinism with pro-Soviet "internationalism." The party cadres remained loyal to the notion of the Soviet Union as a workers' state, in general, until 1956. Several socialist parties, notably the Austrian, British, and Spanish—all quite sizable movements hardly rivalled by insignificant Communist parties—were neither particularly hostile to the Communist parties nor anti-Soviet, but those socialist parties, like the German, which faced the powerful Communist parties, were frightened by the Communists and tended to be anti-Soviet. Existing traditions of left-wing unity remained uninhibited by anti-Sovietism. The popular front was only one variant of anti-fascist unity. Italy provides a strong case of a continuity of left unity. Nenni's ideas of socialist unity remained intact through the fascist period, and the PCI also developed a consistent anti-fascist position which opened to the Socialists.

Hobsbawm commended the conference for helping free historical discussion from the view that the popular front was imposed from the USSR. The notion that the popular front was a betrayal of the working class originated with Trotsky and was continued by Claudin. The right has since argued that all Comintern activity was dominated by Moscow, but in fact the Comintern had a certain freedom of action in 1928–35. When Dimitrov suggested the new line and was supported by Manuilskii, Stalin listened. By making Dimitrov, a rightist in the Bulgarian Communist party, the head of the Comintern, Stalin sanctioned the new line. The period of February to May 1934 saw the transition, but the line had to be effected, and this presented problems. Before June 1934 the old line was mandatory. Bringing Dimitrov back to Moscow had no implications in itself, but putting him in charge of a Comintern section did. Still, it took a long time to sell the line to the movement as a whole. Certain parties dragged their feet, notably the German, Bulgarian, and Hungarian parties (particularly Bela Kun). From the Soviet party Knorin and Losovskii championed the old line. The Seventh Comintern Congress was actually postponed from September 1934 until the following summer. Between July 1934 and July 1935 the new line developed much further than originally intended. The "united front" was extended to the popular front, a formulation which

originated in France, not from the Comintern. The leading Communists both learned and were transformed by this experience.

Hobsbawm then asked for investigation of several serious historical problems. Why was the Comintern line not changed for more than a year from Hitler's coming to power, despite new overtures from the socialist parties? What was the social base of the Communist parties in the 1930s? What was the relationship of the Comintern personnel who fell victim to the Great Purges to the internal Comintern discussion over the change of line?

To what extent, Hobsbawm asked, were the politics of anti-fascist unity primarily a defensive strategy? Did they also have a revolutionary thrust, as illustrated in Stalin's famous letter to Largo Caballero on the Spanish road to socialism and in Togliatti's pamphlet on the Spanish Revolution? In this neglected pamphlet of October 1936 Togliatti argued that the Spanish Revolution was national, anti-fascist, and popular; it was neither merely a bourgeois-democratic revolution on the model of 1905 in Russia nor a repeat of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The Spanish working class was to become the leading force in the revolution which would create a "democracy of a new type." This view, which refers neither to bourgeois governments nor to dictatorships of the proletariat, anticipated the post-World War II scenario. Since the popular front was formed in the context of an attempted military counter-revolution, it opened the possibility of a more radical degree of change. In particular, the logic of anti-fascist mobilization pushed popular frontism beyond the limits envisaged by earlier forms of left coalition (e.g., the formula for worker-peasant governments put forth by Lenin at the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922). The argument for anti-fascist unity was that by fighting fascism one was attacking something essential about capitalism. The conditions and experience of armed struggle obliged the incipient governments of national unity to develop a program for taking charge of the economy. However, this specific form of expropriation was not sufficient to effect the transition to socialism, Hobsbawm noted. The anti-fascist struggle during World War II weakened some capitalisms and strengthened others. With the coming of the cold war the perspective developed in the period of the anti-fascist struggle had to be abandoned.

The symposium ended with an open discussion of ideas for future meetings, and enthusiasm was expressed for continuing the line of inquiry into the postwar period. Eley and Suny are presently putting together plans for a second symposium, to be held in November 1986 in Ann Arbor, which will investigate the politics of left unity during the Resistance and early postwar coalitions, together with the impact of the cold war and the post-Stalin crisis of international communism. Having assembled an agenda of questions from the European experience in the 1930s, the Comintern project will now broaden its focus to include the significant socialist and communist political experiences in the Americas, Asia, and Africa.