



COMMUNISM IN BRITAIN 1920-39

FROM THE CRADLE
TO THE GRAVE

THOMAS LINEHAN

Communism in Britain, 1920–39



Manchester University Press

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For
Daniel Linehan
John March
Philip Newton and
Raphael Samuel

never afraid to swim against the tide

Preface and acknowledgements

As a former Ruskin College student and tutee of Raphael Samuel this is the book I have long wanted to write. Another inspiration was my father, Daniel Linehan. He always interested himself in my work and was with me at the very start of this project but passed away soon after. Just before he left me, I made a promise to him that I would bring the book to completion.

I should like to express my gratitude to the following individuals and members of staff at various institutions, who have helped in some way in the preparation and completion of this book. To begin with, may I express my sincere thanks to the commissioning and editorial staff at Manchester University Press who have supported and assisted this project. It is also a pleasure to acknowledge the support of the Leverhulme Trust which awarded me a two-year Research Fellowship to enable me to conduct the research on this book. Roger Griffin, Richard Griffiths and Stanley Payne supported my application for the Leverhulme Fellowship and I would like to thank them for this support. I would also like to thank the BBS Politics and History research group at Brunel University, particularly Ian Thatcher, for providing me with support and funding during the project's final stages. I should like to thank, too, the various archivists and librarians who assisted me during my visits to their institutions. My thanks go to those at the Bodleian Library, British Library, British Library of Political and Economic Science, Brunel University Library, Marx Memorial Library, National Museum of Labour History, Public Record Office, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History in Moscow, Tate Gallery Archive and the South Wales Miners' Library. I should also like to express my thanks to the scholars, Kevin Morgan, Alan Campbell, Gidon Cohen, Andrew Flinn, Linda Lawton and John McIlroy, who painstakingly compiled the *Communist Party Biographical Project Prosopographical Database*, which helped provide valuable pieces of biographical detail on a number of individuals who feature in this study. In fact, there is a rich scholarship on British communism that takes in this database and extends beyond it in many fine publications. I have yet to make the acquaintance of many of the scholars working on

British communism, though I am grateful to them and their writing for helping my understanding of important areas of the CPGB. I have had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of some who work in this field. Andrew Thorpe provided me with some very helpful background information on the regulations and holdings of the Russian State Archive in Moscow. Others working in this field, and outside it, expressed their encouragement for this project, including Matthew Worley, Keith Laybourn, Nigel Copsey, David Renton, Philip Coupland, Roger Griffin, Michael Dostal, Steven Woodbridge and Julie Gottlieb. If I have forgotten to mention any names, I do apologise to those individuals concerned.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family both here and in Ireland, particularly my mother, for their encouragement. I would like to express my gratitude to my wife, Janet, above all. As always, she provided support and assistance throughout this project and was responsible for much of the final arrangement of the book manuscript. Her support and patience have been invaluable and greatly appreciated. Finally, I would like to thank my two lovely children, Ciara and Michael, for their patience during this project when I was not always around.

Abbreviations

AIA	Artists' International Association
BSP	British Socialist Party
BWSF	British Workers' Sports Federation
CI	Communist International (Comintern)
CLC	Central Labour College
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CYI	Communist Youth International
DLC	District League Committee
DPC	District Party Committee
EC	Executive Committee
ECCI	Executive Committee of the Communist International
ECCYI	Executive Committee of the Communist Youth International
EPA	Emergency Powers Act
ILP	Independent Labour Party
ITS	Industrial Transference Scheme
ICWPA	International Class War Prisoners' Aid
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
KPD	<i>Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands</i>
NCLC	National Council of Labour Colleges
NUWM	National Unemployed Workers' Movement
RSI	Red Sport International
SDF	Social Democratic Federation
SLP	Socialist Labour Party
SWSI	Socialist Workers' Sport International
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UMS	United Mineworkers of Scotland
WEA	Workers' Education Association
WMA	Workers' Music Association

WTM	Workers' Theatre Movement
YCL	Young Communist League

Abbreviations used in the notes

BUL	Brunel University Library
NMLH	National Museum of Labour History, Manchester
RGASPI	Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, Moscow
SWML	South Wales Miners' Library, Hendrefoelan House, Swansea

Introduction

It is necessary, in the first instance, to explain this book's focus. Firstly, this book is a study of the communist life and the communist experience of membership. The study will also place itself on the interface between the membership and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) by considering the efforts of the latter to give shape to that experience. The CPGB was formed in July 1920, a product of a favourable revolutionary conjuncture, Comintern (CI) prompting, and an amalgamation of a number of small home-grown guild socialist, socialist and shop stewards' groups, although the process of making communists did not begin in earnest until after 1923. From this date, following endorsements from the Party's Fourth (St Pancras, 18–19 March 1922) and Fifth (Battersea, 7–8 October 1922) Congresses, a new conception of communist life and membership had been hammered out in accordance with CI instructions to the CPGB to overhaul its methods of work in line with Leninist principles. Out of this process of 'Bolshevisation' emerged the essential characteristics of the communist experience, with its particular flavour and preoccupations. As they sought to fashion this new experience, the advocates of Bolshevisation felt that they were breaking with a tradition of activism that had prevailed in the older pre-Bolshevik labour movement, particularly in the socialist 'sects' like the British Socialist Party (BSP) and the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) out of which the CPGB was made, which imposed little obligation on members save a general token of political support for movement goals.

In its focus on the communist life and the communist experience of membership, this book makes a number of contentions. For those who opted to commit fully to the communist way of life it would offer a complete identity and reach into virtually all aspects of life and personal development. In regard to the latter, through participation in the communist life 'joiners' gained a positive role in life, self-esteem, intellectual development, skills in self-expression, and opportunities to acquire status and empowerment through activities like office-holding or public speaking. There was ample scope to forge new interpersonal bonds.

These relationships often had an emotional pull as recruits felt the warmth of deep comradeship and belonging that came from the collective, shared experience of political struggle. A communist life could also impart a sense of being a part of a wider historical pattern while, in another personal register, it could bestow on recruits that feeling of belonging to the wider community of the world communist diaspora. Communists found that they were fully engaged in a life which aimed to cater for their cultural improvement, physical well-being and recreation, as well as other areas of their personal and interpersonal development. There was always a political purpose behind this effort to provide for these other aspects of the life experience. The cultural, physical and recreational would become key sites of Party efforts to implant the communist way of life in the membership. Through participation in the more informal processes of social and leisure activities, recruits absorbed communist values, experienced communist 'fraternity', and were introduced to an alternative way of life and community outside the framework of the existing capitalist society. Similarly, in a cultural register, Party representatives set out to dislodge bourgeois cultural thoughts from the minds of its proletarian activists by offering them a glimpse of an alternative culture which spoke more directly to their life experience. The CPGB hoped that an orientation towards the new proletarian culture would ensure greater clarity of members' thought and political purpose. As 'ambassadors' for the Party and the wider proletariat, members found that even their personal conduct, habits and appearance were not beyond Party reach and censure.

Another contention of this aspect of the book is that interwar British communism functioned as a type of 'political religion' or 'political sacralisation' for many who entered the congregation of the devoted followers of the Party, in that the communist way of life contained moral, evangelical, sacrificial and penitential ingredients of a kind that characterised conventional movements of religious belief. This book claims that a communist life provided a positive life experience for those who embraced the Bolshevik 'faith', although it also recognises that it could bring pain and disillusionment to others.

There are a few final points to make with regard to this aspect of the book. Although the book claims that for those who opted to commit fully to the communist way of life it could amount to a 'total' experience, it recognises that this experience was not static. Party and Young Communist League (YCL) affiliation during the interwar years unfolded within a shifting political and ideological time-frame which ensured that the experience of membership in 1921 was quite different to that in 1924, let alone 1929, 1933 and 1938. The most obvious time-frames were those imposed on members' lives by the Comintern line periods.¹ The first was 1920–22. This took in the so-called 'First Period' of perceived capitalist weakness and revolutionary opportunity, a strategic 'moment' which apparently soon passed to be superseded by the 'Second Period' of capitalist consolidation. This latter judgement encouraged the communist movement for a few years after 1922–23 to seek alliances of convenience with

'reformist' labour organisations in order to advance mutual goals and stave off capitalist attacks. The 'objective situation' was thought to have altered again by 1928. The previous 'unity' approach was ditched as the Comintern's Sixth Congress (17 July–1 September 1928) formally announced the arrival of a new international conjuncture of impending capitalist crisis. This assessment that a capitalist 'Third Period' was underway launched the communist movement on the ultimately calamitous sectarian policy of 'Class against Class', whereby it confidently asserted its exclusive right to represent and lead the masses in the struggles to come against a capitalist state that was expected to become ever-more coercive as the crisis deepened. The masses did not flock to the communist banner, however. Instead, there was only self-imposed communist isolation from the 'reformist' labour movement, now maligned bizarrely as 'social-fascist', a process which saw the British Party, for example, carry a membership base of less than 3,000 for most of the duration of the 'new line'. 'Class against Class' ran until 1934–35 at which point the Comintern's Seventh Congress (25 July–21 August 1935) officially ushered in the more enlightened and successful 'Popular Front against fascism and war' policy. Thereafter, in the years up to 1939, 'unity' once again became the watchword.² These Comintern line periods act as important signposts for an understanding of the various policy and ideological frameworks within which the various organs of the British Party and their memberships operated between the wars, whether children, youth or adults, and the following chapters have attempted to take account of them whenever possible or wherever pertinent.

Nor were CPGB activists impervious to countervailing pressures and commitments such as could be found, for example, in the locality where they plied their communist propaganda or even in the family networks of which they were a part, pressures and commitments which could have the effect of 'endangering' Party loyalties.³ Finally, the communist experience could be defined by place or region as much as by other factors. In short, the experience of membership in a 'Little Moscow', those defiant townships and villages to be found mostly in north-east England, South Wales and Scotland where communists had managed to enter the mainstream of community life, culture and politics between the wars, could be vastly dissimilar to that encountered in a less numerous concentration of Leninism.⁴ As well as remaining mindful of the context of period, this book attempts to take account of these additional contexts of countervailing tendencies and regional differences.

This book has a second feature. The British Communist Party had a strong and quite marked generational focus, in that it sought to address the experience of Party life and membership at the principal phases of the life cycle. The Party developed rites of passage to guide its 'charges' through the different stages of the life cycle. Thus its reach extended to take in children, youth, and the adult experience, including marriage and aspects of the marital and family relationship. The Party did not disengage even at the beginning and termination of the life cycle.

Its spokespersons advised communist mothers on birth and mothercraft, ‘red’ parents on childrearing, and addressed the experience of death and mourning within the communist domain. It is a further contention of this book that it was this generational dimension, in conjunction with those aspects mentioned above, which helped give the communist life its quite particular flavour and helped confer an almost total character on the communist experience.

To some extent, some of the elements of the communist life that feature in this book were pre-figured in certain of the activities of earlier organisations on the political Left. In a similar manner to communist parents, Chartist parents could be found presiding over ‘Chartist births’ and shaping their offspring in accordance with Chartist values.⁵ As with the CPGB, there was a vibrant recreational side to the Chartist experience, too, as there was with the early Independent Labour Party (ILP).⁶ Indeed some ILP branches seemed quite fond of ‘socials’, and alcohol.⁷ For their part, like many in the CPGB leadership, ILP leaders preferred responsible, temperate members and admonished wayward personal conduct, though in a more moderate key to their later Bolshevik ‘moral’ counterparts.⁸ The idealistic young Turks within the SLP leadership favoured ‘clean living’ also, contrasting their own brand of puritanical Marxism with that ‘inferior’ variety supposedly practised by the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), the body from which they had split in 1903. ‘In the SDF’, the SDF and later SLP activist Tom Bell tells us, ‘we had had specimens of drunkenness, from the leaders down to the local branches, that made the name of socialism stink’.⁹ The earlier Owenite effort to foster good habits and temperance in the utopian cooperative communities is well known, as is the attempt to impart knowledge and enlightenment through educational philanthropy.¹⁰ Fabian socialists, like the communists, also spread the message of enlightenment and intellectual improvement, though of a marked elitist temper.¹¹ There were other points of overlap between the communist life and these earlier traditions. On the recreational front, we know that from the 1890s Clarion cyclists spread the ‘fellowship of socialism’ message far afield.¹² Tom Bell, who made the transition from the SLP to the CPGB, thought this ‘combination of propaganda with pleasure’ had much to commend it and, by the 1930s, clusters of communist ‘Red Wheelers’ could be found gaily cycling along Britain’s roads and byways in the spirit of the Clarion tradition.¹³

Despite these evident lines of continuity and overlap, we should guard against looking at the communist life too closely through the lens of inherited or remembered traditions. Although it is important not to overlook the parallels and continuities with past behaviour and forms, we should not forget that the CPGB and the Left organisations that preceded it belonged to different historical conjunctures. The communist historical ‘moment’ and political project was quite specific, and displayed its own quite particular profile. There was much, therefore, about the communist life and the communist experience that was bound to strike a different note, not least, as we shall see in the book, the attempt

by the Party and its various organisations and representatives to promote a Bolshevik mothercraft, fashion 'little Bolsheviks', shape a new 'proletcult' aesthetic, and give form to new communist death rituals. Communists also recorded comparative success in developing model 'mass' organisations of a new type. Some of these organisations were successful in melding social and cultural activities with definite political objectives, whether this involved already existing bodies that were won over to communist goals like the British Workers' Sports Federation (BWSF) or those that were formed by communist activists, such as the United Mineworkers of Scotland (UMS).¹⁴ More generally, the Communist Party also aimed at an integrated experience for those who entered the communist world. The Party endeavoured to go about its business here in a manner that was comprehensive and systematic, as well as authoritarian in a manner that was quite unlike anything that had gone before in regard to the earlier organisations of the Left.

At this point it should be mentioned that I have tried to make a distinction during the writing of this book between the Party, with its inherently authoritarian structures and practices, and individual communists. The reader will see that whereas I have been justifiably critical of the not infrequent excesses of the former, I have shown more sympathy towards the latter. Many individual communists between 1920 and 1939 submitted to Party authority because they believed that the CPGB as part of the world communist diaspora was the only viable political organisation of the period with the resources and potential to mount an effective revolutionary challenge to the capitalist order of things. If the Communist Party stood for the revolution, particularly for 1920s communists, to many who enrolled in the mid-to-late 1930s it was the embodiment of the fight against fascism. To remain outside the confines of the Party, if was felt, was to risk excluding oneself from these fundamental struggles.¹⁵ In making the above points there is also the author's respect for the activist, the one who made the moral decision to engage in a period of acute political and moral crisis because, as Eli Weisel recognised, 'silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented'.

Mention also needs to be made of the CPGB members and member views used in presenting certain themes in this book. The book aims to give a qualitative sense of the experience of membership and activism as it was felt by different individuals in different ways. In so doing, the book has drawn on the experiences, recollections and commentary of long-serving members and those who remained in the communist framework for shorter periods. In a similar vein, the book draws on the experiences, recollections and commentary of committed cadre activists who retained a life-time fidelity to the communist ideal, and also what one might refer to as 'dissident' members who departed the communist life embittered and recriminatory. Having said this, a note of qualification is needed. Although the book is interested in all the above categories of member, in practice it has had to follow the available source material in tending towards longer duration members who, for obvious reasons, seemed more

inclined to record their memories of membership than those who paid the communist world a more fleeting visit. In that sense, if there is an element of 'typicality', it is that the range of member views drawn upon during the research and writing for this book is more typical of those members who remained for longer spells in the communist network. The book eschews typicality in another respect because although it gives due consideration to the sometimes moving testimonies of life-time cadre activists, it has also listened to the 'voices' of dissident communists. It should be said that some of the latter testimonies, although less numerous than the former, provide insight into the communist experience in all its complexity, richness and anguish in a manner that is vivid and invaluable to this book's attempt to draw a picture of membership experience that gives insight into the many facets of the communist life. Thus, in summary, the range of member views used in the book aims to illuminate and express in a qualitative manner the various and varied experiences of communist members during the period under consideration.

It remains to state the final contention of this book. During the course of my travels through the autobiographical memories of communist activists and Party documents and literature, one is struck by the extent to which the British Communist Party displayed the characteristics of the extended family, albeit the 'modern', Western family form. Like this family form, the CPGB performed an important socialisation function for its members by initiating them into the norms and values of the institution. In that sense, the CPGB had a marked hierarchal structure. It performed a discernible parental role, in that it not only socialised members into the norms and values of the group but it served up role models and catered for their longer term personal, cultural, educational and even moral and physical development. The CPGB endeavoured to provide recreational support for its charges also. It was even on hand at the point of death, providing emotional support and consolation for dying Party members, as well as for bereaved family members following the passing. As well as a hierarchal structure, the CPGB displayed a developmental structure. As mentioned above, and like the family institution, it sought to nurture its charges through the various stages of the life cycle and developed organisational forms and rites of passage to ensure this. Again, like the family, the CPGB was an institution composed of a set of mutually dependent roles, which imposed obligations and duties on its members. Communists were also bound to each other and the group by bonds of loyalty, trust and emotion, as were members of a family. This is not to suggest that the CPGB always exhibited the positive characteristics of the family institution. If anything the CPGB, or more specifically the Party, was a patriarchal 'family' organisation which imposed firm codes of discipline, admonished perceived deviant behaviour, and curtailed personal freedoms. Finally, like all extended families, the British Communist Party was prone to be dysfunctional.

In summary, it needs to be pointed out, that in all the respects cited above, the book will primarily be a social and cultural history of the interwar CPGB and

its membership rather than a study of the British Communist Party's formation, its political ideology, policies and principal personnel, occupational characteristics, the development of its industrial strategies, the centre-periphery relationship with Moscow, or its attempt to combat home-grown and international fascism, although all these areas feature at some stage in the course of the book. These areas have been comprehensively covered in existing studies of the CPGB.¹⁶ As mentioned in the Acknowledgements, I am grateful to this scholarship. It has aided my understanding of important aspects of the CPGB, helped stimulate my thinking, and provides the essential backdrop to this book.

Notes

- 1 On the Comintern, see Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe, *International Communism and the Communist International, 1919–1943* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), and Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (London: Macmillan, 1996).
- 2 See Helen Graham and Paul Preston (eds), *The Popular Front in Europe* (London: Macmillan, 1987).
- 3 These important methodological issues are aired in Kevin Morgan, John McIlroy, Alan Campbell, Andrew Flinn and Gidon Cohen, 'The CPGB Biographical Project: an introduction'. Paper for 'People of a Special Mould' Conference, University of Manchester, 6–8 April 2001, p. 9.
- 4 See Stuart Macintyre, *Little Moscovs: Communism and Working-Class Militancy in Inter-War Britain* (London: Croom Helm, 1980).
- 5 Eileen Yeo, 'Culture and constraint in working class movements, 1830–1855' in Eileen and Stephen Yeo, *Popular Culture and Class Conflict 1590–1914: Explorations in the History of Labour and Leisure* (Sussex: Harvester, 1981), p. 170.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- 7 David Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party 1888–1906* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), pp. 335–6.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Thomas Bell, *Pioneering Days* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1941), p. 42. On the SDF, see Martin Crick, *The History of the Social-Democratic Federation* (Keele: Ryburn Publishing, 1994).
- 10 G. D. H. Cole, *A Short History of the British Working Class Movement 1789–1947* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1948), pp. 75–81.
- 11 Ian Britain, *Fabianism and Culture: A Study in British Socialism and the Arts, 1884–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 223–52.
- 12 Denis Pye, *Fellowship is Life: The National Clarion Cycling Club, 1895–1995* (Bolton: Clarion, 1995).
- 13 Bell, *Pioneering Days*, p. 39.
- 14 The BWSF is discussed in [Chapter 6](#). The UMS receives mention in [Chapter 8](#).
- 15 This point has been made by Party activist (1922–53) Harry McShane. See Harry McShane and Joan Smith, *Harry McShane: No Mean Fighter* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p. 251.
- 16 These works appear in the bibliography and at various points in the chapters of the book.

PART I

The communist life cycle: the early years

