

The Mounties and the Red Menace

Michael Earle

Volume 30, Number 2, Spring 2001

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad30_2re02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Earle, M. (2001). The Mounties and the Red Menace. *Acadiensis*, 30(2), 141–148.

The Mounties and the Red Menace

OVER THE PAST DECADE the Canadian Committee on Labour History has published eight volumes of Royal Canadian Mounted Police Intelligence Section reports, ably edited by Gregory Kealey and Reg Whitaker. The most recent set of five volumes covers the 1933-39 period: *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part I, 1933-1934* (St. John's, Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1993); *Part II: 1935* (St. John's, Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1995); *Part III, 1936* (St. John's, Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1996); *Part IV, 1937* (St. John's, Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1997); *Part V, 1938-1939* (St. John's, Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1997). Earlier publications included a two-volume set, *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The War Series, 1939-1941* (St. John's, Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1989) and *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The War Series, Part II, 1942-1945* (St. John's, Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1993) and a volume which covered the beginnings of the Service, *R.C.M.P. Bulletins: The Early Years, 1919-1929* (St. John's, Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1994), a period for which far fewer reports could be obtained. These volumes are made up of surveillance reports compiled by the RCMP Intelligence Section on the activities of those who were considered threats to Canada's internal security.

The first thing that strikes any reader is the fact that it was almost exclusively the Communist Party and those associated with it who were the subjects of these reports. Even in the period immediately preceding the Second World War, there were very few reports on fascist organizations compared to the large number on communists or organizations characterized by the police as being sympathetic to communism. In the Depression years, as Kealey writes in his introduction to *The Depression Years, Part I*, almost all reports were given on "the Communist Party of Canada, its language federations such as the Finnish Organization of Canada and the Ukrainian Farm Labour Temple Association, and other associated groups such as the Workers Unity League, the Farmers Unity League, the Workers Ex-Servicemen's League, the Canadian Labour Defence League, and various organizations of the unemployed" (p. 8). The material in these reports is of considerable value to those interested in the history of the Canadian left and communism, of ethnic groups and of the trade union and other working-class movements. It also provides first-hand information on the role of the trade union and working-class dissent and important evidence on the Canadian record on civil liberties. On the activities of the Communist Party, in particular, these reports are unequalled in scope by any other contemporary source material. The reports are, of course, extremely hostile to communism and communist activities, but this is so open a bias that it is less liable to mislead than might be an assumed objectivity.

It is largely as a result of the efforts of editors Kealey and Whitaker, through numerous Access to Information requests, that this material became available, and the published reports include many deletions made by government authorities prior to their release. These deletions appear to be mainly the names of individuals. As Whitaker explains in his introduction to *The War Series, 1939-1941*, the justification advanced by the authorities for the deletions is that they contain personal information

exempted in the Access to Information Act (p. 18). These deletions can be frustrating if a researcher is conducting detailed studies, and they certainly seem unnecessary in regard to events which occurred more than 50 years ago.

The deletions are often inconsistent, as for example when an individual is named in one report yet deleted in another. In some cases the removed name is readily available through other sources such as newspaper reports of the time; and in many cases it may well have been this published material which was the RCMP's source of information. One example of the inconsistent and arbitrary nature of these deletions is the coverage of the participation of M.A. MacKenzie of Sydney in a trade union delegation sent to the Soviet Union in 1934 by a communist "front" organization, the Friends of the Soviet Union. MacKenzie's name is well known to anyone studying Cape Breton radicalism in this period, and it is ridiculous to conceal his inclusion in this visit on the grounds that it is personal information liable to harm him or his descendants if released. He was the flamboyant editor of the *Steelworker*, a weekly newspaper strongly sympathetic to the communist cause (and hostile to the RCMP, whom MacKenzie called "The Scarlet Riders of the Plain People" in editorials). MacKenzie, far from keeping his visit to the Soviet Union secret, proudly published reports of his visit in the *Steelworker*. But, in releasing the RCMP report on the meeting which elected him as the delegate representing Sydney steelworkers, it was felt necessary to delete his name (*The Depression Years, Part I*, p. 337); and in another report it is mentioned that Communist Party organizer Phil Luck was editing the *Steelworker* "in the absence of [deletion] who went to the U.S.S.R. with the trade delegation" (p. 379). Yet, in the report on the delegation's departure from Montreal, MacKenzie's name is listed as one of the delegates (p. 351). No doubt similar examples of clumsy and unwarranted deletions could be found throughout the reports.

While these deletions mar the value of the reports, their country-wide scope and the apparently first-hand nature of some of the reports make them wonderful source material. An attempt was being made by the RCMP to cover all relevant activities of the communists, and while their coverage was undoubtedly less than total, it seems reasonably thorough given the limited resources one imagines were at the Intelligence Section's disposal. The best reports of meetings and events appear to have originated with an undercover agent who was in attendance. These more extensive reports usually cover events in larger centres, such as Toronto. Other information in the weekly summaries seems to have been often compiled from newspapers.

The reports produced during the 1930s do not give the impression that the RCMP very often had informants who had penetrated the inner circles of the Communist Party, as presumably had earlier been the case with Sergeant John Leopold who testified at the trial of party leaders in 1931. Almost invariably the first-hand reports were of meetings open to the public. However, it is doubtful that there was much deep secrecy involved in party plans and policies. It was, as indicated in various sources, Communist Party practice to keep secret the party membership of some individuals who, if their party connection was known, might lose positions in which their presence was useful to the cause. Presumably, there were other areas in which the party attempted to keep secret their activities. One example would be the arrangements made in the late 1930s for smuggling volunteers to Spain to fight in the International Brigade. In general it seems unlikely that secret activity ever amounted to much beyond, for example, schemes to get an individual employed in a workplace

to foment union activity. The party was not really engaged in conspiratorial underground activity or plotting acts of sabotage or terrorism. Most of its activities were in the public arena, attempts to promote trade union struggles and political demonstrations aimed at winning support among workers for its cause. Few of these activities involved illegalities much greater than such offences as “parading without a permit”, except in periods in which Section 98 of the Criminal Code made membership in the party itself illegal. This law, repealed in 1936, was the basis for the imprisonment of the party executive in 1931. It made the party illegal on the grounds that its theories called, in the abstract, for the overthrow of the constitution – an example of “thought crime”.

Almost invariably, therefore, the “subversive” activities were such things as speeches condemning capitalism, as well as trade union activity and demonstrations by the unemployed. In general, these activities involved the organization of protests against government policies and the capitalist economic system. None of these activities were in themselves illegal or aimed at promoting violent or illegal actions. They were “subversive” because they might lead to strikes or demonstrations, disruptions of the prevailing economic order of society or wider public protests against the policies of governments. It is possible that some police officers and politicians actually feared the existing conditions might lead to broader social upheavals, or even to attempts at revolutionary insurrection, especially during the Depression years. However, it seems very doubtful that many really saw any short-term danger of a Soviet Canada coming into existence. The real dangers presented by this radicalism, surely, were public protests which could undermine the opportunities for re-election of politicians in power, and a growth of the trade union movement, an anathema to most employers. In particular, strikes which brought loss of production and profits were to be avoided. It was such activity, or the potential for such activity, which the RCMP regarded as subversive, and this forms the principal content of the reports.

In the Depression years, the economic doctrines held by mainstream party politicians and leaders of industry regarded only extremely limited concessions to the unemployed or to industrial workers as acceptable. In the eyes of most authorities, such as the police, magistrates and politicians, the only appropriate answer to radicalism was repression. This kind of thinking led to the imprisonment of communists for their beliefs, the illegality of the party, the deportation of radical members of immigrant groups, the violent suppression of demonstrations, police actions to defeat strikes and events such as the violent confrontation between RCMP and unemployed protesters at Regina on 1 July 1935.

In some respects, repressive actions by the state played into the hands of the communists and, along with the desperation caused by economic conditions during the Depression, led to the growth of party influence during the 1930s. The actions of police, in fact, seemed to confirm communist doctrine that the state exclusively represented the interests of the capitalist class. Throughout the reports, from 1930 to 1937, attempts to build unions among the unorganized workers and labour unrest were almost invariably led by Communist Party organizers. So were the many hunger marches and demonstrations of the unemployed such as the On to Ottawa Trek of 1935. Few economic concessions were given to workers in this period other than grudging relief payments to the unemployed. All efforts to build unions or demand

other concessions were in themselves regarded as communist activities, whether or not the participants were actually members of or sympathizers with the party. Often it was commitment to the communist political ideology which inspired activists to risk personal victimization such as blacklisting by employers for union activity. At the same time, any militant worker demanding union representation and better wages could be branded a communist by the employer and the police.

With regard to overt repression of the Communist Party, the reports reveal that, during the period of the imprisonment of Tim Buck and other party leaders, the campaigns conducted by the Canadian Labour Defence League were among the most effective activities in gaining popular sympathy and support for the party. This growing support eventually led to the release of those imprisoned while the Conservative government of R.B. Bennett was still in power. One of the election promises of William Lyon Mackenzie King during the 1935 campaign was the repeal of Section 98 of the Criminal Code, the law under which the communist leaders had been imprisoned, and it was repealed shortly after the election.

Reports of triumphant meetings held to celebrate the releases of Buck and the others are included in *The Depression Years, Part I, 1933-1934*. The lengthy account of the greatest of these, the mass rally at Maple Leaf Gardens welcoming Tim Buck's release (pp. 439-4), describes the scene in some detail. The report gives the reactions of the crowd of 17,000 people and describes the banners and costumes, and contains summaries of the speeches. This is an example of the RCMP reports at their most readable and interesting. The best of them convey a sense of what it was like to be there at the time. Even when accounts exist by participants of an event, they were usually recorded years later. These cannot recapture the feel of the event as do the first-hand reports prepared immediately afterwards for the RCMP. Most of the reports are not of this quality and are usually disjointed and brief. But interspersed with these are accounts of major meetings and events which have this vivid quality of immediacy.

Only a few of these first-hand accounts of Communist Party activities deal with events in the Maritime Provinces, and these generally appear to have been compiled from information available in local newspapers. There is useful information included, but a student of labour and Communist Party activity in the Maritimes will find the coverage of the region in the reports somewhat disappointing. Newfoundland is not covered at all, as it was not part of Canada in the period. The RCMP appears to have given less attention to the Maritimes than other provinces, although this does vary. For example, in the *Depression Years* volumes each monthly report contains a section of "Reports by Province" of communist activity. In this, the Maritime Provinces are lumped together in one report, and for many months there is no Maritime report at all. Events recorded in the "Maritime Provinces" reports almost exclusively occurred in Nova Scotia, mainly Halifax, Sydney or Glace Bay. It is not surprising that most attention would be paid to these areas as evidence from all sources indicates that these places are where communist activity was most common. However, the reports would suggest there never was any subversive activity occurring in Prince Edward Island or New Brunswick. That is, until the Minto, New Brunswick coal strike in 1938.

There are frequent reports of communist activity among the workers in the Cape Breton coal mines and the Sydney steel plant as well as reports of Canadian Labour Defence League public meetings in Halifax in the volumes covering 1933 to 1935.

This was the period of the communist-led coal miners' union, the Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, and the highly publicized campaign of J.B. McLachlan as a Communist Party candidate in the 1935 federal election. Not surprisingly, the RCMP reports show the force had great interest in these matters. The September 1936 report includes perhaps the most complete account in the whole series of a Cape Breton event, dealing with the public meeting in Glace Bay for the visiting British Communist MP, William Gallacher, at which he had a confrontation with J.B. McLachlan soon after McLachlan's resignation from the Communist Party (*Depression Years, Part III, 1936*, pp. 408-9). Overall, the number of Maritime reports begin to decline in 1936.

Communist Party activity in the region during the years 1937 to 1939 receives little coverage. This no doubt reflects a real decline in communist influence. However, there are developments of national as well as local significance that are not covered in the RCMP reports. For example, only a few reports touch on the important role of Communist Party members such as George MacEachern in the formation of the Sydney steel union, and nothing is reported on the events leading to the passage of the 1937 Nova Scotia Trade Union Act, or the 1938 affiliation of the coal miners' union to the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). The January 1938 shift of the Maritime regional Communist Party headquarters from Cape Breton to Halifax is briefly reported (*Depression Years, Part V, 1938-1939*, p. 50). But, although there were many public meetings on the war in Spain during this period, no account is given of any such meetings in Halifax.

During the early war years RCMP reports on the Maritime region again increased. These were mainly reports on the organizing activities of Pat Sullivan and Charlie Murray among fishermen in Lockeport and elsewhere. Considerable concern was expressed that visits of Sullivan and Murray to Cape Breton seeking support for the fishermen would lead to disruptive wartime strikes in the steel and coal industries. A "Weekly Intelligence Report" dated 2 January 1940 states "their [Sullivan and Murray] activities should be curtailed before there is further trouble, not only among fishermen but also in the coal mining and steel industries of Cape Breton" (*The War Series, 1939-1941*, p. 102). This report is among the few that can be regarded as directly linked to subsequent state action, because Sullivan and Murray were the only two communist activists associated specifically with the Maritime region who were interned in 1940. In contrast to the danger seen in Sullivan and Murray, the RCMP report for June 1941, at the beginning of the large-scale slowdown strike of the coal miners, declared there was no communist influence at work among the miners, and the troubles there would soon be over (*The War Series, 1939-1941*, p. 364).

These RCMP reports on the Maritime region in the early war period seem on the surface rather puzzling. The idea that communist influence was potentially greater among fishermen than workers in industrial Cape Breton seems wilfully naive. Even though the Communist Party influence had declined among the coal miners, it was still significant, and communist supporters remained prominent in the leadership of the Sydney steel union. The RCMP were certainly aware of this, as is made clear in their reports concerning Norman MacKenzie, the president of the local steel union (*The War Series, 1939-1941*, p. 110). Perhaps their downplaying of Cape Breton communism and heightened concern over the activities of Sullivan and Murray among the fishermen make sense. Strong industrial unions already existed by 1939 in

the Cape Breton coal and steel industries. Repressive action by the state, such as the internment of any prominent coal or steel union leaders, would most likely have precipitated, rather than prevented, disruptive strike action. However, in regard to fishermen's organizations the internment of communist organizers could well be seen as a way of inhibiting the spread of union activity.

In general, therefore, the RCMP reports of communist and union activity in the Atlantic region seem only rarely to involve first-hand observation, and are perhaps less thorough than those concerning other areas of Canada. These reports do provide some valuable information specifically on the region's labour history, but their value to anyone studying this subject is primarily as a general source on the wider activities of the Communist Party.

The volumes covering the 1930s are important sources of information about the Communist Party of Canada when it was the most effective and influential. The party's most significant long-term impact was on the development of the trade union movement. The period from 1928 to 1935 was the so-called "Third Period" during which heightened class struggle was on the agenda, moderate or conservative union leaders and social-democratic politicians were denounced as agents of capitalism, and the party attempted, through the Workers' Unity League, to create new "red" trade unions. During 1935, communist policies underwent a dramatic change. In 1934-39, the overriding policy became one of the "Popular Front Against War and Fascism". In trade unions, communists co-operated with any union leaders who would work with them in building new unions. The sequence of events leading to the creation of large industrial unions in both Canada and the United States was most frequently as follows: in the early 1930s communist activists sought to build unions in their workplaces without large-scale success, but they did lay the groundwork for later organizing moves; then in the late 1930s and 1940s, working within the framework of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), communists played key roles in the creation of the large industrial unions.

These issues are raised in the introduction to these volumes, and extensive evidence of the role of communists in trade unions is presented throughout the reports. The second to fifth volumes of *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years* have excellent introductions by John Manley, whose own historical research and published work has been concentrated on Canadian communists during the Depression years.¹ While the introductions to the other volumes by Whitaker and Kealey focus mainly on the RCMP Intelligence Section and the provenance of the reports, Manley concentrates on communist history and provides a good interpretive framework for the reader to understand the significance of the evidence in the reports. It is perhaps not to be expected that these volumes will have a wide general readership, but it is likely that they will be used by scholars and researchers in the field. With Manley's introductions they could well be appreciated by an interested reader who was not previously well acquainted with Communist Party history.

1 John Manley, "Does the International Labour Movement Need Salvaging?: Communism, Labourism, and the Canadian Trade Unions, 1921-1928", *Labour/Le Travail*, 41 (Spring 1998), pp. 147-80 and "'Starve, Be Damned!': Communists and Canada's Urban Unemployed, 1929-39", *Canadian Historical Review*, 79, 3 (September 1998), pp. 466-91.

In the introductions to the *War Series* volumes, Whitaker comments at some length on the anti-Communist orientation of the RCMP Intelligence Section. For example, in the first volume he refers to a 1939 statement by Charles Rivett-Carnac, the head of the Intelligence Branch. Even as war loomed with Nazi Germany, Rivett-Carnac defended the policy of concentrating surveillance efforts on communists rather than fascists by arguing that communism was the greater threat because a fascist government would permit at least a “modified form of capitalism” (p. 10). Obviously this statement implies that Rivett-Carnac saw his primary mission as one of defending capitalism, not democracy or the constitution. But can such a statement be taken to mean that he and his associates really believed there was any danger of a revolutionary overthrow of the government and of a communist state being established which would eliminate the capitalist system? Surely this was not likely.

Whitaker goes on in these introductions, and at greater length in other writings, to discuss the attitude of the wartime government to the RCMP reports and to their anti-communist orientation even while the country was at war with Nazi Germany and allied with the USSR.² This is clearly not simply a matter of a state agency following its own agenda regardless of government indifference. Whitaker points to divisions within the cabinet on this with some ministers, such as Jack Pickersgill, feeling the reports were generally useless and the attitudes revealed potentially harmful. However, it seems that the balance of influence in the cabinet, represented by ministers such as Ernest Lapointe, C.D. Howe and presumably Mackenzie King, supported the continued high-intensity surveillance of communists. They also insisted on maintaining the official illegality of the Communist Party throughout the war, although the party was permitted to operate in the later war years under the name of the Labour-Progressive Party.

To return to the question of the thinking behind anti-communism, it seems hard to believe there was ever any time in which these politicians, or police officials such as Rivett-Carnac, really anticipated dangerous revolutionary upheavals or conspiracies to subvert the state in Canada. The concerns they clearly did have seem apparent in the nature of the surveillance reports themselves, which equated industrial unionism and strikes with communism. In the 1930s, the RCMP were certainly not looking for spies or saboteurs, but rather for union organizers. They, along with many politicians and businessmen, made little or no distinction between union organizers who were communist and those who were anti-communist. Long-established unions had to be lived with, but the growth of the union movement was to be prevented where possible. The important “communist threat” to be averted was the formation of a more powerful trade union movement which could force concessions from capitalism.

The divisions in the Liberal cabinet during the war on such issues reflected divisions in the outlook of leaders of business and government as to the necessity of accepting that concessions to the union movement had become necessary. By 1943, the great number of strikes across Canada and the growing political popularity of the CCF, along with the rising influence of the economic ideas of J.M. Keynes, eventually led to the acceptance by government that such concessions were indeed

2 Reg Whitaker, “Official Repression of Communism During World War II”, *Labour/Le Travail*, 17 (Spring 1985), pp. 135-66.

necessary. They were judged politically necessary for the success of the Liberal Party in forthcoming elections and economically advisable in that more disruption of production and corporate profit would result from denying rather than permitting concessions to workers in the large manufacturing industries. This led to a new system of industrial legality, inaugurated by the passage of P.C. 1003 in February 1944, the order-in-council which is often looked upon as the “Magna Carta” of Canadian trade unionism and made possible the large-scale triumphs of industrial unionism of the immediate post-war period. It also established various controls over the timing of strikes, and, in part, made union leaders responsible for preventing illegal strikes.

Anti-communism did not end, of course, but intensified in the Cold War period that followed the war. But in this period, a clear distinction was made between communists and moderate union leaders who in fact led the struggles to expel communists from leading roles in the unions. This process of internal union struggles between communists and anti-communists began during the war and is well recorded in the wartime RCMP surveillance reports. It may well be that such reports partly led to those politicians who were the most opposed to concessions to agree to the passage of P.C. 1003. While anti-communism could no longer be used to defeat many union gains, it could be used, with the assistance of many union leaders, to moderate and limit the aims of the union movement mainly to wage issues.

The Communist Party of Canada at no time had much success in advancing towards political power in Canada. Its major impact in Canadian history was on the trade union movement. Their importance in this was so great that it is difficult to imagine how the large industrial unions of North America could have been possible without the work of communist-inspired organizers. Evidence of this seems amply provided in these RCMP surveillance reports from the 1930s. It also seems probable that both the RCMP and the politicians to whom they reported, while expressing their anti-communism in terms of political dangers to the Canadian constitution, were concerned mainly about the threat of a larger and stronger union movement. In other words, although one presumes they would most likely never have consciously admitted this even to themselves, what the RCMP was defending against was any shift of a greater share of the profits of the capitalist enterprise to workers.

MICHAEL EARLE