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Résumé de l'article

L'historiographie internationale du communisme a été revigorée par la disponibilité de sources n'ayant pas été précédemment examinées dans les archives de Moscou et par la publication d'un grand nombre de nouveaux travaux. Les débats sont nombreux. Mais au Canada l'étude du communisme a donné lieu à moins de nouvelles études, et à moins de controverses. Cet article aborde les questions litigieuses du bureaucratisme Comintern, de la stalinisation, et de la transformation de la gauche révolutionnaire dans les années 1920 en examinant les histoires politiques de Maurice Spector et James P. Cannon. En tant que personnages principaux dans le mouvement communiste canadien et américain qui avaient répudié le stalinisme et embrassé le trotskysme vers la fin de 1928, leur lutte visant à maintenir la vigueur le potentiel révolutionnaire du bolshevisme souligne tant le succès que l'échec du mouvement, offrant une étude comparative de l'importance de la réalité subjective dans la construction d'une opposition de gauche.

Maurice Spector, James P. Cannon, and the Origins of Canadian Trotskyism

Bryan D. Palmer

A Revived & Fractured International Historiography

THE HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL COMMUNISM has recently been reborn. New sources available from Russian archives and a post-1989 shift in the political climate have changed both the empirical foundations of writing in the field as well as the varied and contested meanings of scholarly engagement.¹ National peculiarities abound.

In the United Kingdom, for instance, a war of position in communist historiography now divides established camps. One side claims that communism must be studied as a movement of national initiative, in which the significant role of the Communist International and its bureaucratization and Stalinization over the course of the mid-to-late 1920s is secondary to the socio-political influence of indigenous leaderships, rank-and-file activism, layered complexities of motivation and experience, and local conditions in specific unions and other settings.² An op-

¹See, for instance, John Earl Haynes, "The American Communist Party Records on Microfilm," *Continuity*, 26 (Spring 2003), 21-26; Randi Storch, "Moscow's archives and the new history of the Communist Party of the United States," *AHA Perspectives* (October 2000), 44-50.

²Among a number of sources that embrace so-called 'revisionism' and could be cited see Kevin Morgan, "Parts of People and Communist Lives," in John McIlroy, Kevin Morgan, and Alan Campbell, ed., *Party People, Communist Lives: Explorations in Biography* (London 2001), 9-28; Andrew Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-1943* (Manchester 2000); Thorpe, "Comintern 'Control' of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1943," *English Historical Review*, 113 (June 1998), 637-662; Thorpe, "Stalinism and British Politics," *History*, 83 (October 1998), 608-627; Thorpe, "The Communist Interna-

posing contingent accents Russian dominance, harkening back to the writings of Henry Pelling, but does so with a marked attachment to the critique of 'the revolution betrayed'.³ In this twisting of interpretive arms, the relative international strength of British communism and the weakness of American-style New Left-inspired scholarship within the United Kingdom has cast a particular shadow across recent writing on the British revolutionary left. For while both sides pay lip service to the importance of a 'social history from below', those who defend the communist record most aggressively and insist that it was much more than a 'made in Moscow' affair seem to congeal Stalinist, New Left, and even liberal positions. Their critics, in contrast, assimilate certain strains of older liberal anti-communism (Russian domination and a reification of democracy) with aspects of a programmatic Trotskyism that have never rested easily with a brusque repudiation of democratic centralism, the rejection of the primacy of the vanguard party, and skirting the significance of tested international leadership.⁴

tional and the British Communist Party," in Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe, eds., *International Communism and the Communist International, 1919-1943* (Manchester 1998), 67-86; Matthew Worley, "Reflections on Recent British Communist Party History," *Historical Materialism*, 4 (1999), 241-261; Nina Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions, 1933-1945* (Aldershot 1995); Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935-1941* (Manchester 1989).

³A key British text was Henry Pelling, *The British Communist Party: An Historical Profile* (London 1958). While by no means as substantial as the two-volume history of American communism produced at the same time by Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York 1957), and *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York 1960), Pelling's work positioned itself in comparable ways. For critiques of the 'new revisionism' that harken back to Pelling and Draper in the British context see John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, "'Nina Ponomareva's Hats': The New Revisionism, the Communist International and the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1930," *Labour/Le Travail*, 49 (Spring 2002), 147-187; John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, "'For a Revolutionary Workers' Government': The Communist International, the Communist Party of Great Britain and Revisionist Interpretations of the Third Period, 1927-1933," *European History Quarterly*, 32 (2002), 535-569; John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, "Histories of the British Communist Party: A User's Guide," *Labour History Review*, 68 (April 2003), 33-59; John McIlroy, Barry McLoughlin, Alan Campbell, and John Halsted, "Forging the Faithful: The British at the International Lenin School," *Labour History Review*, 68 (April 2003), 99-128.

⁴The current historiographic impasse is mechanically conveyed in Tony Judt, "Rehearsal for Evil," *New Republic*, 10 September 2001. Particularly ideological and self-serving statements relating to the British writing appear in Nina Fishman, "Essentialists and Realists: Reflections on the Historiography of the CPGB," *Communist History Network Newsletter*, 11 (Autumn 2001), 7-16; Harriet Jones, "Conference Report: Is CPGB History Important?," *Labour History Review*, 67 (December 2002), 347-354. They are replied to forcefully in Alan Campbell and John McIlroy, "Is CPGB History Important?," *Labour History Review*, 68 (December 2003), 385-391. Hints of the problematic dichotomization that has hardened in recent years were evident in previous positions developed by Geoff Eley, "International

United States communist scholarship has taken a slightly different trajectory.⁵ From the late 1970s, American communist historiography has pitted a traditionalist liberal anti-communism, stressing 'foreign domination', espionage, 'Moscow gold', undermining of 'national interest', the inflexible rule of Comintern dictate, and institutional and political concerns,⁶ against a rank-and-file-oriented social history of native American radicalism, much of which skirts rather lightly not only the international context of US communism and its birth, but also the entire question of Stalinism.⁷ Yet, ironically, Theodore Draper's founding traditionalist texts of the

Communism in the Heyday of Stalin," *New Left Review*, 157 (January-February 1986), 91-92, and Raphael Samuel, "The Lost World of British Communism," *New Left Review*, 154 (November-December 1985), 3-53; "Staying Power: The Lost World of British Communism (Part II)," *New Left Review*, 156 (March-April 1986), 63-133; "Class Politics: The Lost World of British Communism (Part III)," *New Left Review*, 165 (September-October 1987), 52-91.

⁵For a different but related discussion see Bryan D. Palmer, "Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism," *American Communist History*, 2 (December 2003), 139-173; John Earl Haynes, "The Cold War Debate Continues: A Traditionalist View of Historical Writing on Domestic Communism and Anti-Communism," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 2 (2000), 76-115; Haynes and Harvey Klehr, "The Historiography of American Communism: An Unsettled Field," *Labour History Review*, 68 (April 2003), 61-78.

⁶Some key texts include: Harvey E. Klehr, *Communist Cadre: The Social Background of the American Communist Party Elite* (Stanford 1978); Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York 1984); Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton, *The Rosenberg File: A Search for the Truth* (New York 1984); Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself* (New York 1992); Harvey Klehr and Ronald Radosh, *The Amerasia Spy Case: Prelude to McCarthyism* (Chapel Hill and London 1996); John Earl Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace? Communism and Anti-Communism in the Cold War Era* (Chicago 1996); Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Fridrikh Irorevich Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven and London 1995); Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kryill M. Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven 1999); Vernon L. Pederson, *The Communist Party in Maryland, 1919-1957* (Urbana and Chicago 2001).

⁷This literature is surveyed in Palmer, "Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism," but for key texts see: Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown, CT 1982); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Urbana and Chicago 1990); Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York 1994), 103-122; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London 1996). James R. Barrett makes the case for an accent on the personal and everyday dimensions of communist history in "Revolution and Personal Crisis: William Z. Foster and the American Communist Personal Narrative," *Labor History*, 43 (2002), 465-482, and in reply to my "Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism," in "The History of American Communism and Our Understanding of Stalinism," 176-182. See as well, for an argument that problematically overstates the autonomy of communist activists by accenting local issues resolved through

late 1950s and early 1960s, on which so much liberal anti-communist scholarship as well as New Left writing builds, remain unsurpassed as sources on the origins of United States communism and are among the most accomplished studies of the revolutionary left in the 1920s, regardless of national setting. The current impasse in United States communist historiography sets the followers of Draper, led by Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, against a fragmenting body of New Left-influenced scholars. If Klehr and Haynes are too easily assimilated to a politics of right-wing revival, even to the point of being miscast as defenders of McCarthyite repression,⁸ there is no doubt that some former New Leftists have abandoned what they perceive to be the sinking ship of revolutionary Marxism.⁹ Others hold fast to a committed defence of the communist ranks and certain leaders, claiming for local communists a capacity to 'negotiate' their own politics of dissidence, seemingly autonomous from Moscow's authority.¹⁰

To work our way out of this intellectual and political log-jam is not going to be easy, for evidence can be read differently, and the premises of interpretation are, inevitably, often seriously counterposed. There is no history, arguably, where political readings of difference are more pronounced than that of communism. Nevertheless, if the history of international communism is to advance, one route of exploration that demands scrutiny is the thought and practice of dissident streams within the Bolshevik tradition.¹¹ Exploring these brings to the fore the *possibility* of

Control Commissions, Randi Storch, "'The Realities of the Situation': Revolutionary Discipline and Everyday Political Life in Chicago's Communist Party, 1928-1935," *Labor: Studies in the Working-Class History of the Americas*, 1 (Fall 2004), 19-44.

⁸Ethan Bonner, "Witching hour: rethinking McCarthyism, if not McCarthy," *New York Times*, 18 October 1998, Section IV, 1, 6; Ann Coulter, *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism* (New York 2003).

⁹Maurice Isserman, "Notes from the Underground," *The Nation*, 12 June 1995, 846; Isserman, "Guess What — They Really Were Spies," *Forward*, 29 January 1999; Isserman, "They Led Two Lives," *New York Times Book Review*, 9 May 1999; Sean Wilentz, "Seeing Red," *New York Times Book Review*, 21 January 1996, 15-17.

¹⁰Edward P. Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton 1994); James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana and Chicago 1999); Storch, "Revolutionary Discipline and Everyday Political Life."

¹¹See, for instance, John McIlroy, "The Young Manhood of Arthur Reade," in McIlroy, Morgan, and Campbell, eds., *Party People*, 51-77; Peter Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left: A Socialist Odyssey through the 'American Century'* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ 1994); George Breitman, Paul Le Blanc, and Alan Wald, *Trotskyism in the United States: Historical Essays and Reconsiderations* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ 1996); Isaac Deutscher, "The tragedy of the Polish Communist Party," in Isaac Deutscher, *Marxism, Wars and Revolutions: Essays from Four Decades* (London 1984), 91-127; P. Minc (Aleksander), *The History of a False Illusion: Memoirs on the Communist Movement in Poland, 1918-1938*, translated and edited by Robert Michaels (Lewiston, NY 2002); and the Prometheus Library publications on James P. Cannon: *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Com-*

a revolutionary left that both learned from the Soviet revolution and its leaders and remained alive to the need to cultivate creatively transformative social movements rooted in the realities of non-Russian conditions and societies. Alternatives to Comintern bureaucratism and Stalinization¹² germinated slowly and unevenly in the mid-to-late 1920s, revealing certain revolutionary continuities with the engagements of 1917 and the pioneering lessons many radicals saw in the Russian Revolution and the world's first workers' state. They also open out in understandings related to the peculiarities of specific national settings.

Canadian Communism: Ripe for Reinterpretation

Canadian communism is perhaps fertile ground for such an approach. The study of Canadian revolutionaries, communist and other, has not been particularly promi-

munism: Selected Writings and Speeches, 1920-1928 (New York 1992); *Dog Days: James P. Cannon vs. Max Shachtman in the Communist League of America, 1931-1933* (New York 2002). One of the best overviews of communism and labour, Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict that Shaped American Unions* (Princeton, NJ 1977), was written by a former dissident Bolshevik, while some of the most sophisticated writing on communism and the cultural arena has been produced by Alan Wald, whose political allegiances are rooted in the legacies of the Left Opposition. See, among a number of critically important studies by Wald: *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill and London 1987); *Writing from the Left: New Essays on Radical Culture and Politics* (London 1994).

¹²I locate these developments in the mid-1920s and see the programmatic reversals of this period most critically exposed in the Stalinist 'socialism in one country' opposition to the previous Bolshevik commitment to world revolution and internationalism. As long as the original Bolshevik project was eclipsed in the retreats of 'socialism in one country', rationalizations and justifications of non-communist policies and practices could be made, most of them turning on the supposed *national* needs of the 'revolutionary' state, increasingly associated with the all-powerful leader. Recent social histories accent a 1930s atmosphere of authoritarian atrophy that included orchestrated purges of the Communist Party leadership, the growing apparatus of Soviet repression, and the decline of anything resembling a communist culture, intellectually and politically. Also significant, of course, were the wild oscillations in policy that were developed within the Communist International, imposed on all national sections of the international communist movement. Thermidor had arrived. Recent social/political histories that understate this relationship of program and practice include Sheila Fitzpatrick, "New Perspectives on Stalinism," *Russian Review*, 45 (1986), 357-414; Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times — Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York 1999); Aileen Kelly, "In the Promised Land," *New York Review of Books*, 29 November 2001; Eduard Mark, "October or Thermidor? Interpretations of Stalinism and the Perceptions of Soviet Foreign Policy in the United States, 1927-1947," *American Historical Review*, 94 (October 1989), 937-962. Note, as well, Palmer, "Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism"; Henry Reichman, "Reconsidering 'Stalinism'," *Theory and Society*, 17 (January 1988), 57-89; Tariq Ali, ed., *The Stalinist Legacy: Its Impact on Twentieth-Century World Politics* (New York 1984).

nent of late, and the contentious historiographic debates of some other countries have hardly developed in Canada. Older scholarship on Canadian communism in the 1920s, such as William Rodney's 1968 *Soldiers of the International*, has not really been revisited since Ian Angus offered a stimulating Left Opposition reading of Tim Buck and Canada's Party of socialism, in 1981.¹³ A major biographical study of Canadian communism's leading trade union figure, the Nova Scotia coal miner militant, J.B. McLachlan, has many strengths, but grappling with Stalinism is not among its distinguished features, just as it figures inadequately in overviews of the Party's history, even in recent noteworthy 'red diaper baby' memoirs.¹⁴ The exception that proves the rule of conventional scholarship is Andrée Lévesque's marvelously evocative life and times of the communist militant, Jeanne Corbin, which combines an empathy with the struggles of revolutionaries aligned with Moscow and an appreciation of Comintern constraints.¹⁵ There is of course much in the journal literature, including John Manley's important particularistic studies, but we still await his overall interpretation in published book form.¹⁶ Most recently, a fruitful resurrection of perhaps the leading theoretical figure in early Canadian communism, Maurice Spector, has been undertaken by Ian McKay. But McKay's Spector is cast very much as a man of ideas, rather than a political figure in the making of dissident communism, which was always an undertaking as much organizational as it was intellectual.¹⁷

¹³ William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: A History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1919-1929* (Toronto 1968); Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montreal 1981).

¹⁴ David Frank, *J.B. McLachlan: A Biography* (Toronto 1999); Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism: The Stalin Years and Beyond* (Toronto 1988); James Laxer, *Red Diaper Baby: A Boyhood in the Age of McCarthyism* (Vancouver/Toronto 2004).

¹⁵ Andrée Lévesque, *L'Epoque de Jeanne Corbin, 1906-1944* (Montreal 1999). See also, Lévesque, *Virage à gauche interdit: Les communistes, les socialistes et leurs ennemis au Québec, 1929-1939* (Montreal 1984).

¹⁶ John Manley, "Canadian Communists, Revolutionary Unionism, and the 'Third Period': The Workers' Unity League, 1929-1935," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, New Series, 5 (1994), 167-194; "Does the International Labour Movement Need Saving?: Communism, Labourism, and the Canadian Trade Unions," *Labour/Le Travail*, 41 (Spring 1998), 147-180; "'Starve, Be Damned!': Communists and Canada's Urban Unemployed, 1929-1939," *Canadian Historical Review*, 79 (September 1998), 466-491; "'Communists Love Canada': The Communist Party of Canada, the People, and the Popular Front, 1933-1939," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 36 (Winter 2002), 59-88; "'Audacity, audacity, still more audacity': Tim Buck, the Party, and the People, 1932-1939," *Labour/Le Travail*, 49 (Spring 2002), 9-41.

¹⁷ See Ian McKay, "For a New Kind of History: A Reconnaissance of 100 Years of Canadian Socialism," *Labour/Le Travail*, 46 (Fall 2000), 87-95. McKay's major study of Spector is unpublished, and in its preliminary form was presented as a paper at the Canadian Historical Association Meetings, May 2003, "Revolution Deferred: Maurice Spector's Political Odyssey, 1928-1941." See, as well, the brief (albeit often misinformed) comment on Spector in

In this article, I explore the ideas *and* organizational initiatives of James P. Cannon, a major figure in US communism in the 1920s,¹⁸ and Spector, in breaking from Stalinism and their respective Communist International affiliated parties. My purpose is neither to detail extensively two biographies nor to provide a full-blown history of Cannon and Spector embracing the Left Opposition and the richness of the thought and activity associated with this current. Rather, I utilize some of the new source material and draw on older studies to present a fuller, and hopefully more nuanced and balanced, discussion of the beginnings of Canadian Trotskyism than has heretofore existed. I further suggest how this first chapter in the history of Canada's Left Opposition was simultaneously an important breakthrough in ideas and thought that was nevertheless stalemated for a time by the limitations of organizational possibility. By way of a conclusion, I offer some admittedly tentative and speculative comment on the coming together of subjective failure on the part of Spector and objective constraint imposed upon him by Canadian conditions and decisions taken within the concentrated forces of international Trotskyism. However open to debate and discussion such conclusions certainly are, there is no denying that a comparison of Cannon, Spector, and the beginnings of Trotskyism in their respective countries highlight the importance of personality and subjectivity in the interpretation of communism and its historical development.

Biographical Background: Cannon, Class Struggle, and Party Building

By the mid-1920s Cannon and Spector were established, if different, figures in their particular communist parties. Cannon (1890-1973), eight years Spector's senior, had the richer and deeper experience as a figure on the labour left, but lacked the acute theoretical inclinations and analytic subtlety of his Canadian comrade. Born into a poor household of first-generation Irish American immigrants, who settled in the midwestern working-class enclave of Rosedale, Kansas, Cannon was the offspring of a devout Catholic mother and a socialist 'charmer', who graduated from marginal proletarian pursuits to making his living with his tongue *via* the real estate and insurance markets. By the age of 16, Cannon was working on major la-

Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929-1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham and London 1991), 144-147; as well as early statements such as Gary O'Brien, "Maurice Spector and the Origin of Canadian Trotskyism," MA thesis, Carleton University, 1974; O'Brien, "Maurice Spector, Pioneer Canadian Socialist, on the National Question," *Forward* (November 1974); Ross Dowson, "Maurice Spector, 1898-1968," *Workers Vanguard*, 26 August 1968.

¹⁸On Cannon see James P. Cannon and the *Early Years of American Communism*, and *Dog Days* as well as Les Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him: By Thirty-three Comrades, Friends, and Relatives* (New York 1976). Cannon's major books have been published in various editions, and include *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* (1943); *The History of American Trotskyism* (1944); *Notebook of an Agitator* (1958); and *The First Ten Years of American Communism* (1962).



James P. Cannon, mid-1920s,
Workers Monthly.

bour defence mobilizations. Two years later, in 1908, he joined the Socialist Party of America. He soon became an Industrial Worker of the World, and was eventually one of a select few hand-picked cadre chosen by Vincent St. John to proselytize among unorganized workers, from Akron, Ohio and Peoria, Illinois to Duluth, Minnesota. Thwarted by poverty from completing high school and going to college, Cannon's career as a hobo rebel was terminated as he became a Wobbly homeguard, settling in Kansas City after marrying his teacher, the free-thinking Scandinavian Lista Makimson, with whom he had two children during the difficult years of World War I.

Galvanized by the Russian Revolution, Cannon rejoined the Socialist Party [SP], was part of its Left-Wing mobilization and schisms, and came to play a forceful role in the emerging communist underground. One of the few communists arrested during the Palmer Raids for direct industrial agitation, Cannon emerged as a figure of significance, marked by his experience in class struggle and his capacity to intersect the American working class (barely 10 per cent of the ranks of the

Left-Wing were English-speaking Americans, the vast majority of the US revolutionary forces being drawn from the 'foreign language federations' of immigrant radicals). A leading figure in the Communist Labor Party [CLP], Cannon was the founding Chair of the original Workers Party, and he championed an organization that would break out of the clandestine existence of the underground, appealing to the broad masses of the United States working class. Over the course of the 1920s, he was, alongside Charles Emil Ruthenberg, Jay Lovestone, and William Z. Foster, a leading public spokesman within United States communism.

Known as a stunning orator, a *political* party leader with a keen appreciation of the trade union question, extensive editorial experience within the revolutionary press, and a builder of coalitions that crossed the fragmenting lines of language groups and bridged seeming political difference, Cannon came to be a prominent leader of a faction that included his second wife and longstanding revolutionary, Rose Karsner, the irrepressible youth figures Max Shachtman, Martin Abern, and Albert Glotzer, the steeled proletarian elements of Minneapolis (including Bill Dunne and his brothers), and the Swedish veteran of the Seattle General Strike, Arne Swabeck. Aligned at times with his old Kansas City counterpart, Earl Browder, as well as with the youthful Lovestone, the Jewish Socialist Federation Left-Wing theoretician, Alexander Bittelman (who had gravitated to the other organized contingent of the underground, the Communist Party) and Foster, the most prominent proletarian communist in the US by the mid-1920s, and founder of the Trade Union Educational League, Cannon also led the International Labor Defense organization. It was undoubtedly communism's most successful 'united front' organization, a body that gained credibility and widespread exposure through its involvement in prominent cases such as the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign and that opposed lynch law and racist terror throughout the 1920s.¹⁹

Cannon read the revolutionary classics, of course, and was a highly effective journalist of the agitational school, founding and editing newspapers such as Kansas City's *Workers' World* and Cleveland's *The Toiler*. But his baptism as a Marxist was not *via* the word, but through the deed, and very definitely within the maelstrom of factional organizational differentiation. In the intensely divided United States Party, Cannon's mettle as a Marxist was tested as much organizationally and politically as it was theoretically, where, in any case, the Kansas revolutionary was always willing to turn to precocious thinkers such as Shachtman.

¹⁹This paragraph and what follows draws upon my forthcoming study, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928*, appearing in 2006 with University of Illinois Press.

*Biographical Background: Spector and the Uneven Development
of a Bolshevik Intellectual*

Not so with Spector (1898-1968), a Ukrainian-born Jewish socialist, whose life in Toronto's archetypal immigrant ward was anything but privileged. Spector nevertheless graduated from high school and secured admission to the prestigious University College of the University of Toronto. Much of Spector's early adult life was spent living with his father, a less than highly successful hardware merchant, and his housewife mother on Palmerston Avenue. If he was largely self-educated in his Marxism, his revolutionary experience was definitely more bookish than Cannon's. Won to communism by the sheer revolutionary logic of pamphlets and texts, by 1920 Spector, who largely lacked Cannon's peripatetic agitational experience (an April 1923 speaking tour that took Spector from Sudbury to Edmonton, with seven public talks in ten days, was something of a baptism by fire for the young leftist²⁰), had helped to found Toronto bodies such as the Plebs League and the Ontario Labour College, establishing working relationships with nascent communists Florence Custance and Tom Bell. It would be this trio of Spector, Custance, and Bell that would be charged with drafting the first program of a Canadian communist party. Spector early clashed with the more proletarian Scots-Canadian Jack MacDonald, who was quicker to declare himself a communist, and with whom his relations would be uneasy throughout the 1920s. Both men nevertheless figured in the 23 May 1921 meeting at Fred Farley's farm on the outskirts of Guelph, Ontario, where the Communist Party of Canada, later to be renamed the Workers Party, was formed. Spector, a mere youth of 23, and then a university student, was, like Cannon, named the Party's Chairman. Tim Buck would later describe Spector as "brilliant," but distanced from "working-class organization" and practical activity. For the next few years Spector would edit Canada's major communist publication, *The Worker*, authoring dozens of feature articles and countless editorial and other statements, occupying an influential place in the left-wing movement, where he was a significant voice in elaborating the program and practice of the Workers Party. Ultimately Spector was elected to the Executive Committee of the Communist International [ECCI] in 1928, a rare honour for a North American revolutionary.²¹

²⁰Canadian Security and Intelligence Service, Access to Information Act, File of Maurice Spector, born 19 March 1898, died 1968, "Report re Workers Party of Canada — Maurice Spector, Tour through Western Canada," Ottawa 'O' Division, Headquarters Reference 4/44, Toronto, 6 March 1923. [My thanks to Gregory S. Kealey for making this file available to me, hereafter referred to as CSIS.]

²¹I draw selectively on the writings of Draper, O'Brien, Angus, Alexander, and McKay (cited above) in this brief biographical sketch of Spector, filtering material presented by them through my own researches into Cannon's life. Particularly useful, as a thumbnail sketch, is the biographical appendix in Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 169-170. See, as well, Tim Buck, *Yours in the Struggle: Reminiscences of Tim Buck*, eds., William Beeching and Phyllis Clarke (Toronto 1977), 97, 99, 103-104, 125, 128-129.



Maurice Spector with leading Canadian communists, left to right William Moriarty, Tim Buck, and Jack MacDonald, mid-1920s, Vanguard Press.

The Canadian Party no doubt experienced divisions and difficulties with the Comintern, but it was spared somewhat the hothouse atmosphere of factionalism that prevailed in the New York-Chicago-dominated American vanguard. It would never deal in quite the same ways with the awkwardly disruptive legacies of undergroundism and ultra-leftism associated with elements of the US foreign language federations and, later, the Goose Caucus, that came close to tearing the nascent United States Party apart in the 1920-1922 years. No Comintern 'rep' would be sent into its midst who could compare to Joseph Pogany/John Pepper, who would exercise such a nefarious influence among American revolutionary ranks. Differentiations of leadership elements, reflective of socio-political division, would not be as great in Canada as they were in the United States. Had Spector and the Canadian Party faced the situation Cannon confronted in the 1920s, it is unlikely that, as a student whose experience was bounded by Toronto, the Ukrainian Canadian revolutionary, whatever his talents, would have assumed the Chairmanship of the early communist party and the editorship of its press.

For while Spector was undoubtedly Canadian communism's leading theoretical light in the mid-1920s, he was nevertheless barely 25 years of age, and was most surely still learning his way in the vocation of professional revolutionary. If he would later develop into what one close comrade referred to as an orator of "considerable ability,"²² Spector was apparently little better than a mediocre public

²²Albert Glotzer, *Trotsky: Memoir & Critique* (Buffalo 1990), 27. William Krehm, who as a youthful recruit to Trotskyism worked with Spector in the early 1930s in Toronto, recalled

speaker in his youth. Royal Canadian Mounted Police [RCMP] agents repeatedly described Spector as “the poorest paid agitator I have ever met,” prone to being “rattled” by hostile questioning or heckling, “a little green at the tub-thumping game,” and so on. The inside Party critique of Spector was that he was somewhat lazy, a judgement that may well have mistaken dips into personal and incapacitating depressions for a tendency to avoid the taxing labours of the professional revolutionary. Dissatisfaction with Spector’s initial editorial management of the communist press was ostensibly rife within the revolutionary ranks. There were those on the pro-Soviet left who, early in the history of the Canadian communist movement, considered Spector less of an agitator than an “intellectual,” even, perhaps, a “coward, and afraid of the police.”²³ A close comrade, entirely sympathetic to Spector, would later comment, “he wasn’t made out of iron.”²⁴

Nevertheless, few in Canadian communist ranks could match Spector’s incisive intelligence and his cosmopolitan reach, which the young revolutionary cultivated with a keen interest in the European revolutionary movement, especially relating to Germany and the failed uprising of 1918-1919, a topic on which Spector

that during this period Spector was a masterful speaker in both English and Yiddish. Although his voice would sometimes break, in Krehm’s recollection Spector was especially effective in Yiddish, keeping audiences of needle trades leftists enraptured. Bryan D. Palmer interview with William Krehm, Toronto, 25 May 2005.

²³For comment on Spector from police agents, see CSIS file of Maurice Spector, born 19 March 1898, died 1968: ‘O’ Division, Western Ontario District, Report re J. MacDonald and M. Spector — Delegates to Congress of Communist International by A.W. Duffus, Toronto, 15 September 1922; H.Q. Ref. 175/4720, “Report Re Workers Party of Canada ... Edmonton,” 17 April 1923; H.Q. Ref. 115/5052. “Report Re Workers Party of Canada ... Edmonton. Re. Maurice Spector,” 15 April 1923; H.Q. Ref. 175/5062, “Re: Maurice Spector, Workers Party of Canada (Regina, Saskatchewan),” 13 April 1923; H.Q. Ref. 175/50—, “Report Re: Maurice Spector, Toronto, Workers Party Delegate to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International (Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan),” 12 April 1923; H.Q. Ref. 175/5-62, “Report Re: Workers Party of Canada, Maurice Spector’s Tour through Western Canada,” [April 1923]; H.Q. Ref. Ottawa ‘O’ Division, 6/90, “Report Re Workers Party of Canada, Central Executive Committee, Maurice Spector,” Toronto, 2 October 1923; H.Q. Ref. SSD 212-250, “M. Spector, Workers Party of Canada,” A report received by the Central Executive Committee of the Workers Party of Canada, from Maurice Spector, Berlin, 15 January 1924, dated 25 February 1925 (Regina, Saskatchewan); Undated report [1922] on Spector, ‘O’ Division, 6/90, 4/44, 6/286, Ottawa Reference, 175/3193, Toronto. Although in general Stewart Smith, *Comrades and Komsomolkas: My Years in the Communist Party of Canada* (Toronto 1993), is not reliable and is hostile to Spector, its representations of the youthful communist leader are not out of step with the above. (70-71)

²⁴“Maurice Quarter interview, taped, 31 May 1975,” [Arnie Mintz], copy in possession of the author, as well as in the Ross Dowson Papers, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa. I thank Ian Angus for providing me with a transcript of this interview [hereafter referred to as Quarter interview].

often spoke in public meetings. The Ukrainian Canadian leftist not surprisingly distinguished himself with an insightful, if truncated, analysis of the German debacle of 1923, having been in Europe at the time, observing first-hand the ruthless suppression of communists and workers who had come to the brink of revolutionary insurrection, before travelling to Moscow to attend the Thirteenth Conference of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. He parted company with Zinoviev's rationalizations and obfuscations in the Comintern apparatus, at least partially, in an unpublished report to the Central Executive Committee of the Canadian Party. The seeds of a sympathetic approach to Trotskyism lay in that encounter, although Spector did not embrace a Left Opposition analysis on his own. Indeed, he downplayed somewhat early dissident positions that would later surface in Trotsky's insistence on the responsibility for the tragic failure of the 1923 Revolution being placed squarely on the shoulders of the Communist International [CI/Comintern] and the German Party [KPD]. Spector's political reading of the German Revolution's failure could be described as incorporating features of the mainstream Comintern position, but backtracking into areas of critique that would later be developed by Trotsky. Spector's more public journalism in *The Worker*, and agitational speeches such as a Montreal talk before an audience of 300 in May 1924, were perhaps even less forthright, however analytically powerful they were in comparison to the lack of critical commentary developing in communist circles.²⁵

²⁵Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 181-182, cites Spector's report to the CEC, 14 January 1924. I rely on a copy of the same report, dated Berlin, 15 January 1924, copied in CSIS, H.Q. Ref. SSD 212-250, Secret, Report of the Officer Commanding, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, "M. Spector, Workers Party of Canada," Southern Saskatchewan District, Regina, 25 February 1924. On Spector's published assessment of the German situation see his two-part article, "Letter of E.C.C.I. to German Communist Party," *The Worker*, 7, 14 March 1925. I thank Ian McKay for making his files on Spector's writing in *The Worker* available to me. Note, as well, the account of a Spector speech in Montreal, 25 May 1924, CSIS, H.Q. Ref. 174/4745, Quebec District, "Re: Communist Party of Canada," J.W. Philips, Commanding Quebec District, Montreal, 30 May 1924; Maurice Spector, "Ebert Dies and Cheats the Gallows," *The Worker*, 14 March 1925. Background on Germany and the Left Opposition in the early 1920s can be gleaned from *The Platform of the Left Opposition* (1927) (London 1963); Leon Trotsky, *The Challenge of the Left Opposition* (1923-1925) (New York 1975), 163-174. Later, of course, Spector would come to embrace Trotsky's views on the German defeat of 1923 unequivocally, and he authored an insightful introduction to Trotsky's English-language publication, *Lessons of October* (New York 1937), which contrasted the Bolshevik leadership's role in Russia in 1917 with that of the German CP/Comintern leadership in 1923. Subsequent commentators have generally understated what I suggest is an ambivalence in Spector's position, exaggerating claims of Spector's Trotskyism in 1924-1925. Note Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 182-183, where a careful argument is developed, but which stresses that up to a point Spector's analysis "corresponded with that of Zinoviev," but ultimately was also the same as Trotsky's (a rather implausible bridging of contradiction), while O'Brien, "Spector and the Origins of Canadian Trotskyism," 34; Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 72; and Ross Dowson, "Maurice Spector, 1898-1968," *Workers Van-*

A Meeting of Hesitant Minds

Spector would certainly have been aware of Cannon early in the 1920s, and possibly in 1921, when, as a member of the Canadian wing of the United Communist Party, he participated in the UCP/CLP fusion orchestrated by Cannon's comrade, Caleb Harrison. Whether Cannon knew anything of Spector at this early date is less likely, although it is possible there was a connection through Charlie Scott, who had met with Spector, Buck, and others in the autumn of 1921. Scott was one of a number of "all-out Lettish Bolsheviks" that Cannon befriended in his earliest days in the New York movement, people he personally liked and "felt a kinship with." The paths of Cannon and Spector certainly crossed, if only lightly, in Moscow in 1922, at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International. Spector, along with Custance and MacDonald, attended the 1 December 1922 assembly devoted to a discussion of legalization of the United States Party, where Cannon (alias Cook) led the successful move to secure Comintern endorsement of an open, above-ground American communist party. MacDonald spoke in favour of the Cannon position, and indeed the Canadian Party had been functioning as a legal entity for some time, pursuing a course very much like that advocated for the US by Cannon. By all accounts Cannon's performance was riveting, and a young Maurice Spector would almost certainly have been impressed by the Rosedale native's political acumen. Spector returned to Canada convinced of the necessity of continuing the work of the above-ground legal communist party and dispensing with the underground apparatus as soon as it was possible to do so, a position diametrically opposed to views he had ostensibly held two years previously, in March 1921.²⁶

guard, 26 August 1968, present Spector as coming to the same conclusions as Trotsky. In actuality, Spector's difference with Trotsky was an inability to appreciate strongly enough that in 1923 Germany the conditions for a successful proletarian revolution were present, but that the one crucial element lacking was adequate leadership within the KPD and, especially, the Communist International.

²⁶Statements by MacDonald, Katayama, Gordon, Sasha [Rose Pastor Stokes], Carr [Katterfeld], Trachtenberg, Cook [Cannon], in "Minutes, American Commission," 1 December 1922, Reel 2, 32-37, Documents from the Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Contemporary History, Microfilm Copies Held by the Prometheus Research Library, New York, NY [hereafter Russian Center, PRL]. I have examined "Moscow Archive" material in the PRL, and cite it as such. Note also, Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 101; Draper, *Roots of American Communism*, 385-388; James P. Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Communism: Report of a Participant* (New York 1962), 70-73, 194; Buck, *Yours in the Struggle*, 124-125. For police accounts of Spector's claims that communist parties in the United States and Canada could only be illegal and therefore an underground apparatus was essential (1921) to Spector being the most outspoken advocate within the Canadian leadership for an above-ground party and minimization of the underground apparatus see CSIS, H.Q. Ref. 175/2889, Royal Canadian Mounted Police re Meeting at Hamilton, E.D.A., 9 March 1921; 'O' Division, Western Ontario District, A.W. Duffus, "Report

Throughout the early-to-mid-1920s there is little indication that Cannon and Spector had any direct contact. Yet the two North American leaders endorsed parallel understandings of “collective leadership” within communist movements, international and domestic, where no single individual could command ultimate authority and the leading cadre were divided by programmatic difference and factional identification.²⁷ Spector almost certainly had a better appreciation of Trotsky’s political critique of the Communist International’s errors, with Cannon facing more acute pressures to be aboard the anti-Left Opposition bandwagon. If he did not jump on the steamroller of assault, he did participate in the witch hunt. Spector was more able — because of his considerable prestige, because his rival Jack MacDonald did not think the Canadian Party should concern itself with the CI’s anti-Trotsky diatribes, and because the Canadian Party was not as intensely differentiated by factionalism as its US counterpart and seemingly of less significance than parties in countries like the United States — to deflect Moscow’s directives to issue statements against the Russian Oppositionists.

Indeed, the leadership of the Canadian Party in the mid-1920s offered rare refusals to knuckle under to the growing Comintern demand to repudiate Trotsky and all Left Oppositionist dissidents. A 1925 Spector-drafted (but also undoubtedly influenced by Jack MacDonald, and acquiesced to by Tim Buck) rejoinder was somewhat unique in Communist International circles in its reasoned rejection of the Moscow demand to side unequivocally with the rising tide of anti-Trotskyism:

The Executive Committee is not convinced on the basis of evidence obtained, that the Comintern is actually menaced and confronted with a system constituting Trotskyism. Notwithstanding Trotsky’s mistakes prior to 1917 and during the course of the revolution, we are unconvinced that the implications of the ‘permanent revolution’ theory attributed to him are actually entertained by Trotsky and that he contemplates revision of Leninism. We are of the opinion that the prestige of the Comintern has not been enhanced here by the bitterness of the anti-Trotsky attack. No request from leading elements or party membership for discussion in the Party press.

This earned the Canadian Party a stiff Comintern rebuke, and the material censure of its Organizational Bureau head, O.A. Piatnitsky, who withheld funds from the Canadian Party. Canada’s communists were thought to be plagued by “consider-

re Communist Party of Canada — Advice of the Comintern as to Future of the Workers Party,” Toronto, 4 February 1923.

²⁷Cannon’s espousal of “collective leadership” was more developed and became, in the mid-to-late 1920s, a fundamental feature of his struggle to break a factional log-jam within the upper reaches of the US Workers Party. In Spector’s case comment on “collective leadership” was directed toward Zinoviev and the Comintern in the aftermath of Lenin’s death. For a brief introduction only see *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*, 40, 362-366; O’Brien, “Maurice Spector and the Origins of Canadian Trotskyism,” 6, quoting Spector in *The Worker*, 30 January 1926.

able ideological confusion,” condemned by the Executive Committee of the Communist International for their favouring of Trotskyism, which supposedly left them isolated from the world revolutionary movement.²⁸ But the fallout from this Canadian refusal to be whipped into line by the Comintern would actually prove to be surprisingly moderate, in part, perhaps, because Spector, MacDonald, Buck, and others in the leadership kept the matter isolated among themselves, confined to Central Committee discussions.²⁹ Maurice Quarter, later a convert to Trotskyism, joined the Young Communist League [YCL] around 1927, and he recalled, from the distance of the mid-1970s, that the Canadian communist ranks knew next to nothing about Comintern controversies involving Trotsky and Stalin. Well connected to the powerful Finnish and Ukrainian sections of the Party, Quarter did not “remember any protesting against the suppression of Trotsky.” He first learned of “the problem” when, on a visit to the United States, he read Max Eastman’s *The Real Situation in Russia*. “That was the first disclosure we ... had of the fight that was going on inside the Communist Party,” Quarter stressed, concluding, “Actually Canada was more or less a backwash.”³⁰

If Spector managed to maintain a semblance of ‘neutrality’ on the question of Trotskyism within the leadership ranks of the Canadian communist movement over the next few years, he was nevertheless increasingly forced into particular corners as figures such as Tim Buck, Bill Moriarty, and others accommodated to the Comintern and Jack MacDonald retreated into something of an agitational shell, in which the struggles in Canada were represented as increasingly paramount. In later years, there was suggestion that as Buck placed the Canadian section on record as standing against Trotskyism and the Russian Opposition at the 1927 Seventh Plenum of the Comintern, Spector offered his resignation as Party Chairman and editor of *The Worker*, only to be urged by MacDonald, the National Secretary, to reconsider, which he did. At this time, a mere twelve months before the Sixth Congress, Spector was still the most supported of the Canadian Central Executive Committee

²⁸Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 95-96, 119, quoting *The Worker*, 1 August 1925; *Resolution of the Canadian Commission, Fifth Plenum ECCI, to the CEC, Communist Party of Canada* (Moscow 1925), 7-8; Tim Buck, *Thirty Years: The Story of the Communist Movement in Canada, 1922-1957* (Toronto 1975), 67.

²⁹There is a tendency among some of the writing on Spector to see him as entirely responsible for decision-making in the Canadian party. Spector later repudiated such a view, stressing that, “Not mere modesty but the interests of historic truth ... and the fact of the actual balance of forces in the Canadian C.E.C. compel me to disclaim this honor.” Maurice Spector, “Stalinism in the Canadian Communist Party,” *The Militant*, 1 June 1929.

³⁰Quarter interview. The Quarter interview is rambling and at times somewhat incoherent. It is vague as to detail, and not reliable in terms of dating specific events. But it does provide some interesting commentary on Spector, MacDonald, and the early years of the Left Opposition in Canada.

leaders, more ballots being cast for him than for any one of the other eight nominees.

The Canadian section within which Spector functioned actually proved highly uneven in its response to the Left Opposition. On the one hand, the divided leadership of the Canadian communist movement seemed to have little political heart, in the mid-1920s, for an all-out factional contest. On the other, at the Lenin School in this same period, an induction course in "The Errors of Trotskyism" was being taught by the Canadian Stewart Smith, the 18-year-old son of the Reverend A.E. Smith, a young man who took to Stalinism with the evangelical fervour of his familial background. Smith, not Spector, would unfortunately be elevated to the stature of a major figure in Canada in the later 1920s, consolidating a Buck-Smith leadership pole that would eventually assail Spector and marginalize crucial figures such as Jack MacDonald and Florence Custance who, unlike Spector, could not immediately be assailed as Trotskyists. All would eventually be repudiated by the Party they founded. Smith played the decisive role in supposedly vanquishing 'the counter revolutionary' Trotsky and his Left Opposition followers; the so-called Right Opposition would go soon thereafter. As the Communist Party of Canada moved into its ultraleft sectarian 'Third Period' in the early 1930s, Smith not surprisingly distinguished himself as one of Canada's most rabid opponents of 'social fascism'.³¹

By 1927-1928, then, there was little hiding from the Stalinist assault on Trotskyism and the increasing drift of the Comintern into a programmatic repudiation of the Bolsheviks' original platform, world revolution, *via* the rerouting of the forces of proletarian internationalism on to the narrower ground of 'socialism in one country'. Spector attended the US Workers (Communist) Party's Central Executive Committee Plenum of 4-7 February 1928.³² By this time, with Ruthenberg dead and Jay Lovestone at the helm, United States communists were blasting at

³¹On the issue of Spector's thwarted resignation in this period see "Jack Macdonald Joins the Left Opposition," *The Militant*, 28 May 1932; John Manley, "Moscow Rule: International and Indigenous Forces in the Formation and Implementation of the Communist Party 'Line' in Canada, 1921-1931," Unpublished Paper, Canadian Historical Association Meetings, Halifax, NS, May 2003; *The Communist International: Between the Fifth and Sixth World Congresses, 1924-1928* (London 1928), 360; Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 144; "The Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 150-151, No. 488, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, New York, NY; Smith, *Comrades and Komsomolkas*, 108; *Intercontinental Press*, 16 September 1968. Stewart Smith would write under the pseudonym, G. Pierce, penning some of the most outrageously sectarian communist writings of the 'Third Period'. Note G. Pierce, *Socialism and the C.C.F.* (Montreal 1934).

³²Basing his assertion on a 31 May 1958, Detroit, interview with Spector, Alexander claims that Spector came to the United States in February 1928 in search of allies for the struggle then being waged in the Communist International. Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 144. There is in actuality no evidence to suggest this was indeed the case. See Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 185.



James P. Cannon in Moscow with, left to right, Bill Dunne, Tom O'Flaherty, and Bill Haywood, 1925, *Labor Defender*.

Trotskyism full force. Cannon's ongoing project of forging a collective leadership within the American Party had been stalemated, the organizational apparatus was being ruled with an iron hand guiding it inexorably to the right, and relations between the Foster and Cannon camps had soured over differences around trade union policy. As Lovestone's lieutenant, Bertram D. Wolfe, offered up a particularly shrill Plenum attack on the Opposition in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Cannon sat glum in the audience, and refused a push from Bill Dunne to line up against the Russian dissidents the better to secure the Cannon faction's future within the Comintern. Alone in the back of the hall, "disgruntled, bitter, and confused," Cannon either sensed Spector's disillusionment or the Canadian caught the American leader's depressed eye.

The two spent the evening together, commiserating over the recent expulsions of Trotsky and Zinoviev, discussing at length the contrived nature of the anti-Opposition denunciations. Aside from a smattering of acquaintance with some Russian documents critical of the Anglo-American Russian Committee's thwarting of independent activity in Britain during the 1926 General Strike, Cannon confessed to having no fundamental grasp of what was at stake, programmatically, in the 1927-1928 battle inside the Soviet Communist Party. Spector seemed of the same critical, but hesitant, mind. And so Cannon stayed reluctantly quiet on the question, he and Spector apparently agreeing that neither of them "had any idea of

what we could do about” the issue of Trotsky and the Left Opposition, and made “no plans ... at the time.” Spector may well have hedged his bets, feeling Cannon out, but there is no basis for thinking that he was a truly convinced Trotskyist in the winter of 1928, nor that he had ‘theoretical’ answers to any of the perplexing questions the growing, and increasingly more obvious, degeneration of the Russian revolution posed. But a kind of cagey political connection had been forged by two of the leading figures of North American communism.³³

*The Sixth World Congress: Stalinization and the Birth
of the Cannon-Spector Alliance*

Spector and Cannon were both delegates to the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International, convened in Moscow 17 July through 1 September 1928. It was the first time the CI had assembled in four years, the delay running over schedule by some 24 months. The internal situation in the Soviet Union was largely hidden from the revolutionary ranks who descended on the first workers’ state from all corners of the globe. But had they seen conditions as they actually were, it would not have been reassuring to the visiting delegates, some 515 in number, representing 58 national sections of the international communist movement. Unemployment was now a recognized reality in the workers’ republic. A bread crisis threatened urban centres with famine. Once revered figures were now banished from power, driven from Moscow to remote corners of the Soviet Union. The Left Opposition had been expelled from the Communist Party, and arrests of its advocates had begun.

Historically, the Sixth Congress proved a major step toward subordinating the *world* communist movement, with its diversity of struggles and needs, to the dominance of the Soviet Union, and, in hindsight, to the consolidation of Stalin’s unquestioned rule and elevation to a theoretical maxim of the contradictory notion of ‘socialism in one country’. But none of this registered decisively at the time. Rather, sad disillusionment reigned. Discerning delegates found the proceedings dispiriting. The communist climate seemed barely recognizable when compared to the early 1920s. Passionate debate and committed revolutionary leadership had then, it was generally agreed, characterized Comintern meetings. Instead, international figures shook their heads in despair at the arrogance of the Russian leaders, who obviously demanded and received “dull and sad parades of loyalty.” It made the Italian Marxist Togliatti feel like “hanging oneself,” while the French communist, Thorez, thought the mood of the Congress one of “uneasiness, discontent, and skepticism.”³⁴

³³Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 185.

³⁴See Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 300-302; Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921-1929*, Volume II (New York 1959), 425-426, 444; E.H. Carr and R.W. Davies, *Foundations of a Planned Economy, I: 1926-1929* (Harmondsworth 1974), 497; Fernando Claudin, *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform*

Spector, whose arrival in the Soviet Union preceded Cannon's, quickly lined up with his American counterpart's factional allies, his intelligence and cosmopolitan reach appreciated as strengths. For his part, Cannon would have been aware that Spector's role within the Canadian section had been to soften anti-Trotskyism since approximately 1925, and the dissident pair had established the beginnings of political trust in February 1928. Beyond this, there remained the challenging project of making an alliance, and finding a programmatic path. None of this was evident as Cannon and Spector first met in Moscow during the early summer of 1928. Draper thus overstates the case of Spector's programmatic certainty dramatically, declaring that on the eve of the World Congress Spector was the only actual Trotskyist in the entire Western hemisphere. Spector's journalism in *The Worker* and his subsequent response to understanding and implementing the programmatic meaning of anti-Stalinism establish clearly that whatever the Canadian communist's attraction to Trotskyist ideas, he was no conscious Left Oppositionist prior to the Sixth Congress. Cannon, less likely to have aired his programmatic perspectives journalistically, shared with Spector an unease and a disillusionment, but needed, as well, to come to grips with the contradictory meanings of 'world revolution' versus 'socialism in one country'. It was at this point that a document surfaced that clarified for both Cannon and Spector what was wrong within the Communist International, and what must be done to put things right.

Had things worked on the Program Commission the way they were supposed to, it is possible that Cannon and Spector would have had little to do, the decisions about the Comintern program having already been predetermined by the established Stalinist functionaries. But in this period of the late 1920s the bureaucratic machineries of the Soviet state and the Comintern were perhaps not as forcefully mechanical and as repressively efficient as they would be in later decades. Or, alternatively, they may have been in perfectly machiavellian order.

Trotsky and the Left Opposition, largely driven into exile, faced a series of awkward dilemmas as they found themselves manoeuvred into various political cul-de-sacs by Stalin's left lurch and anti-rightist move against Bukharin. They nevertheless appealed to the Sixth Congress with a number of short documents detailing the theoretical degeneration of the Soviet Union's revolutionary leadership and outlining the repression that had been visited upon the heads of communist dissidents.³⁵ But the critical statement was Trotsky's *The Draft Program of the Communist International: A Criticism of Fundamentals*. The document, a withering assault on the draft of a Comintern program pieced together by Bukharin, Stalin,

(Harmondsworth 1977), 77; Milorad M. Drachkovitch and Branko Lazitch, "The Communist International," in Drachkovitch, ed., *The Revolutionary Internationals, 1864-1943* (Stanford 1966), 184-187.

³⁵ As an example of one such document see Bolsheviks-Leninists (Opposition) of the Factories and Workshops of Moscow, "To the VI Congress of the Communist International," [n.d.], Reel 9, Russian Center, PRL.

and his various hangers-on, was submitted to the Sixth Congress and found its way, erringly according to Cannon, into the translation department, where a dozen or so stenographers and language experts had little enough to do that they put two of the three sections of the document into readable form for foreign delegates and distributed a limited number of poorly translated copies to heads of the convening communist sections and members of the Program Committee. "So, lo and behold, it was laid in my lap," Cannon later exclaimed, "translated into English!"³⁶ Spector, too, would have received a copy. Claiming that the *Draft Program* was in fact buried in a special committee, where its closely monitored and numbered/labelled copies were leaked surreptitiously to various quarters, Manuel Gomez [Charles Shipman] perhaps adds substance to the apparently common Comintern rumours that Stalin may well have allowed the Trotskyist document some circulation the better to best Bukharin from the left. William Z. Foster, apparently, saw the document and considered it a masterful critique of Comintern practice.³⁷

³⁶Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 49; Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 210. The publishing history in the United States of Trotsky's *Draft Program* is as follows. The Comintern-translated portion of the entire draft, sections 1 and 3, was read by Cannon and Spector and published in the United States as Leon Trotsky, *The Draft Program of the Communist International: A Criticism of Fundamentals* (New York 1929). Section 2, which contained much of relevance to the American situation, with Trotsky's critique of Farmer-Laborism, was unavailable for a year, appearing as *The Strategy of the World Revolution* (New York 1930). Trotsky's *The Third International After Lenin* (New York 1936) finally made the complete version of the draft available more than six years later.

³⁷Charles Shipman [Gomez], *It Had To Be Revolution: Memoirs of an American Radical* (Ithaca and London 1993), 171; Arne Swabeck, Unpublished, Unpaginated Autobiography, Autobiographies File, Chapter 12, Prometheus Research Library, New York, NY; James P. Cannon and the *Early Years of American Communism*, 64; Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 141. Deutscher, *Prophet Unarmed*, 443-444, notes that Stalin was dropping broad hints to foreign delegates at the Sixth Congress that indicated his willingness to initiate a rapprochement with Trotsky. Stalin's "Corridor Congress" emissaries talked about Trotsky's possible rehabilitation. It is therefore not beyond possibility that Trotsky's *Draft Program* was deliberately made available to select elements, with the purpose of both flushing out suspected Trotskyist sympathizers and laying the groundwork for a 'left' assault on Bukharin. If this was indeed the case, Spector certainly, and possibly Cannon, would be likely targets in the Stalinist manoeuvring. A number of international delegates, many of whom would become hardened in their Stalinism over the 1930s, apparently saw Trotsky's *Draft Program* and expressed their admiration for the document's Marxist analysis. Draper insists that Cannon was wrong in thinking that the Stalinist bureaucracy merely slipped up in allowing the document into select circulation. See Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 365, 516 n. 20. For a contrasting assessment, more accepting of Cannon's views, see Sam Gordon's statement in Evans, ed., *Cannon As We Knew Him*, 55-56. There are also comments on the *Draft Program*'s circulation at the Sixth Congress in Harry Wicks, *Keeping My Head: The Memoirs of a British Bolshevik* (London 1992) 102, 158; Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson, *Against the Stream: A History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain, 1924-1938* (London 1986), 36-37.

As much as the Sixth Congress politics and personal alignments within the American section seemed in flux in July and August 1928, Cannon and Spector soon came together, rightly grasping that serious scrutiny of Trotsky's *Draft Program* demanded the close quarters of individual attention among those who could be trusted to bide their time and work for the creation of a Left Opposition in North America. Their first task was to pour over the roughly and incompletely translated document.

Trotsky correctly identified the foundational issue as the programmatic divide separating international revolution and socialism in one country. He insisted in a short, preface-like statement that "the fate of the Communist International" was now bound up in evaluating the last five years of the Comintern's political practice, so "rich in events and mistakes," demanding nothing less than a strict Marxist analytic accounting. Finding the Bukharin-Stalin draft severely wanting in this regard, Trotsky commenced his statement with due attention to the forces of world capitalism that any program advocating international revolution would necessarily have to address. In what must have registered immediately with Cannon and Spector, Trotsky laid great emphasis on the hegemony of North American capital, arguing that its inevitable forthcoming crisis would seek resolution at the expense of Europe. Trotsky insisted that prior to 1925 all theoretical traditions in the Communist International adhered to basic Leninist premises. It had long been understood that capitalism's uneven, sporadic development scripted the uneven and sporadic nature of the socialist revolution, and that, moreover, the interdevelopment of national political economies in the epoch of global capital and imperialism structured not only the political but also the economic impossibility of building socialism in one country. Abandoning such premises led to programmatic error, evident in the official draft program of the Sixth Congress.

Among the mistakes Trotsky singled out four: the exaggeration of the level of productive forces in the Soviet Union; blindness to the uneven development of various branches of industry; a basic ignorance of the international division of labour; and a critical slighting in the imperialist epoch of the contradiction inherent in the expanding productive forces and the boundaries of nation-states. At issue, of course, in all such comment, was the need to prepare for and oppose the imperialist war drive, a point Spector raised in his Congress speeches, as well as the extension of revolutionary class struggle internationally. This Trotsky saw as fundamentally compromised by Stalin's notion of socialism in one country, rooted in the thoroughly mistaken view that the internal contradictions of Soviet socialism could be overcome within the boundaries of the first workers' state, rather than through world proletarian revolution. Programmatically this reduced the Communist International to a merely auxiliary body, a guardian of Soviet well-being, rather than an arm of revolutionary internationalism. National reformism was born at the interface of such theory and its programmatic logics. This was the seedbed of social patriotic blunders, such as the unfortunately rigid application of Comintern positions

in the Chinese Revolution of 1926-1927, when the forces of world revolution proved incapable of adapting to Chinese communists' growing awareness of the costs associated with aligning with their own bourgeoisie, on the grounds that the 'national' revolt against imperialism led by Chiang Kai-Shek was the critical cutting edge of social transformation. As the Chinese revolutionary forces discovered in bloody defeat, the necessity to wage bourgeois revolution in the East depended on the proletariat's capacity to open the eyes of the oppressed people to the treachery of the bourgeoisie, and to undertake its own struggle for power. When, under Stalin, Zinoviev, and Bukharin, the Comintern failed to advance the Third International's programmatic position in this direction, as Trotsky would ultimately do with the elaboration of his views on permanent revolution, it compromised severely the World Revolution, in China, to be sure, but also in Russia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas.³⁸

Spector's journalistic contributions to *The Worker* had addressed the development of revolutionary possibilities in China in ways that opened out into Trotsky's later criticisms,³⁹ but for both Spector and Cannon Trotsky's critique was so powerful because it brought together a forceful synthesis of what was wrong, programmatically, in the policies of the Communist International. From the German debacle of 1923 to the China defeats of 1926-1927, there was now an analytic umbrella under which the mistakes of five years of the Communist International could be explained, and the Soviet domestic downturn and narrowing of political agendas interpreted sensitively. Trotsky's *Draft Program* was thus a document much larger in the sum of its parts than in its particulars, associated with specific events. For Cannon, it forced some difficult personal reassessment:

The foot-loose Wobbly rebel that I used to be had imperceptibly begun to fit comfortably into a swivel chair, protecting himself in his seat by small maneuvers and evasions, and even permitting himself a certain conceit about his adroit accommodation to this shabby game. I saw myself for the first time as another person, as a revolutionist who was on the road to becoming a *bureaucrat*. The image was hideous ...

The question remained what to do. Both Cannon and Spector were, however, products of their environment: "the politics of the Comintern had become a school of maneuverism, and we ourselves had been affected by it," Cannon confessed. He and Spector initially discussed following unprincipled subterfuges of their own, the better of course to achieve their desired ends. "Trotsky's document on the Draft

³⁸See Trotsky, *Draft Program*; Michael Lowy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution* (New York 1981). For a discussion of Spector's Congress interventions on the war question see Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 140-141. As editor of *The Worker*, Spector had been addressing the war drive since 1926.

³⁹*The Worker*, 25 December 1926; 2 April 1927.

Program was a great revelation of the meaning of principled politics,” Cannon would later acknowledge, “[b]ut for us at the time it was a new revelation [and] ... we were only beginning to assimilate its full significance.” In the end, Cannon and Spector decided to take the high road, to keep relatively to themselves, and talked to very few comrades about the unsettling programmatic meaning of Trotsky’s criticism of Comintern fundamentals. In Cannon’s words, he and Spector “let the caucus meetings and the Congress sessions go to the devil while we read and studied this document.” Cannon’s appetite for group jostling within the American Workers (Communist) Party was waning fast: “I began to slow down and lose interest in the faction fight altogether.”⁴⁰

Such recollections feed the view that Cannon was an almost absent presence during the 1928 July-August Comintern meetings.⁴¹ This is not entirely correct. To be sure, Cannon began to recede from view in the delegation gatherings as early as 21 July 1928. He missed a number of caucus and official meetings, and two key allies in the combined opposition, William Dunne and Jack Johnstone (Foster’s lieutenant in the Chicago Federation of Labor), objected to refusals to allow Cannon a proxy vote on a Foster motion within one Congress function at which Cannon was supposedly “unavoidably absent.” Even when present, Cannon often abstained on specific votes, including a number of defeated motions put forward by his closest allies, Dunne and Gomez/Shipman.⁴²

But, that said, Cannon, while keeping his political cards rather close to his chest, did undoubtedly engage in discussions with his most trusted factional allies, trying to feel them out on the questions he now knew were central. Gomez, for instance, suggested in an interview with Draper in 1964, that Cannon “talked a great

⁴⁰Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 210-212, 225; Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism: From Its Origins (1928) to the Founding of the Socialist Workers Party (1938)* (New York 1972), 49-50; Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 207-208.

⁴¹Consider, for instance, the way in which the events of the Sixth Congress are portrayed in Peter Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left: A Socialist’s Odyssey Through the ‘American Century’* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ 1994), 36-37. A Canadian communist antagonist to Trotskyism and Spector presents Spector as equally sullen and absent at the Sixth Congress proceedings, but this too is exaggeration. See Smith, *Comrades and Komsomolkas*, 108-112.

⁴²For Cannon’s absences see, for instance, “Minutes of the Meeting (4) of the Full American Delegation,” 21 July 1928; Undated note, signed Bill Dunne, Jack Johnstone [on Cannon’s proxy vote]; “Roll Call,” undated record of Voting Delegation, with Cannon the only member of the group of 20 unaccounted for, Reel 2b; Dunne, Hathaway, *et al.*, to Dear Comrades, 31 August 1928, Reel 6, Russian Center, PRL. Oddly, the “Minutes of the American Delegation,” 22 August 1928, and “Minutes of the American Delegation,” 23 August 1928, Reel 2b, Russian Center, PRL, do not record Cannon as present *or* absent, but do record him involved in motions and voting. It is possible that this is the result of poor minute taking in recording Cannon’s presence, or, also, that it reflects absence but proxy votes/motions. The 22 August Minutes record Cannon abstaining on a number of motions.

deal about Trotsky without supporting Trotsky and without opposing Stalin — but raised questions in a very ambiguous way that made one ask himself, ‘Why is he talking like that anyway? There is something peculiar going on here’. Cannon almost certainly mishandled what must have been some kind of attempt to open a dialogue on Trotsky with Bill Dunne. While he would later come to see his old trade union counterpart and close comrade Clarence Hathaway in an extremely critical light, he was at the beginning of the Comintern meeting an ally of longstanding duration with whom Cannon was most likely to have attempted some political discussion, however guarded. Hathaway had been through what Cannon eventually regarded as the “misnamed” Lenin School, where he had “been trained to scent the wind in the Russian party, and he was a fully indoctrinated Stalinist.” But upon his arrival at the Sixth Congress, Cannon probably did not look upon the experienced labour leftist with such a jaundiced eye. He saw Hathaway as something other than a mere ‘hanger-on’ “serving his own interests,” and he may have revealed himself to his Minnesota ally, who now had a developed nose in how to sniff out the less-than-loyal. Hathaway would have been a perfect conduit through which information about Cannon’s ‘wavering’ on Trotskyism could have been passed to Stalinist authorities. One Lovestone supporter, the persistently demagogic Harry M. Wicks, attacked Cannon openly for using Trotsky’s document as unattributed ammunition in his polemical shots against the notorious John Pepper. In any case, the Russian secret police, the GPU, were sufficiently aware of Cannon’s “monkeying” with Trotskyism that they supposedly compiled a file on the American delegate during his Comintern stay in Moscow.

As for Spector, the adaptable German communist, Heinz Neumann, warned the Canadian of “rumors that he was meeting with the wrong people.” Whether acting on his own or as an agent of other forces, Neumann clearly had a bead on something. The gregarious, affable, and well-liked German, who travelled in the Bukharin circle for a time only to abandon it as Stalin threw a noose around its collective neck, would later be executed in one of the purges of the 1930s. In 1928, he was playing a particular game, and offered to arrange a Stalin interview for Spector. (Similar consultations would be orchestrated for Foster and Lovestone — separately, of course — with Stalin, and for Bittelman and Gomez with Stalin’s alter ego, V.M. Molotov.) When the Toronto Marxist turned down the visitation, he found himself interrogated by the GPU. As circumspect as they thought they were, Cannon and Spector were indeed putting out signals.⁴³ Nor was Cannon entirely si-

⁴³ On the above paragraphs see Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 50; Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess: The Truth About American Communism* (New York 1940), 508; Theodore Draper interview with Manuel Gomez, 18 February 1964, Series 3, Number 9, Draper Research Files, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, cited in *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*, 63. On the Cannon-Dunne relationship in terms of Cannon’s early Trotskyist turn see James P. Cannon to Albert Glotzer, 14 August 1929; Cannon to Glotzer, 24 August 1929; Albert Glotzer to Max

lent, for all his preoccupation with Trotsky's *Draft Program*, in the public discussions of the Comintern. He spoke decisively, for instance, in a major speech before the Comintern on 28 July 1928. He pilloried the record of the Lovestone leadership and extended the Minority Opposition's attack through discussion of various opportunistic errors of the Workers (Communist) Party, particularly as they related to the Socialist Party, the trade unions, women's work, and the cooperative sector.⁴⁴

In the enlarged Anglo-American Secretariat, Cannon locked horns in August with the presiding Soviet official, the former Ukrainian Menshevik turned die-hard Stalinist, G. Petrovsky, demanding the floor to air some differences that he had with Bittelman, who had spoken for the anti-Lovestone forces within the US Party. The closet American Left Oppositionist was unequivocal in his support of the platform of "The Right Danger in the American Party," which he had signed along with

Shachtman, 13 September 1929, James P. Cannon Papers, Archives, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, Reel 3 [hereafter JPC Papers]. On Spector and Neumann see Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 139; Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 208; Ruth Fischer, *Stalin and German Communism* (London 1948), 445-446; Gitlow, *I Confess*, 436, 527. On arranged meetings between Stalin/Molotov and members of the American delegation see Shipman [Gomez], *It Had To Be Revolution*, 172; Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism*, 243; Bertram Wolfe, *A Life in Two Centuries* (New York 1981), 459; Ted Morgan, *A Covert Life: Jay Lovestone — Communist, Anti-Communist, and Spymaster* (New York 1999), 74-75; Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 309-312; Gitlow, *I Confess*, 502-504; *Stalin's Speeches on the American Communist Party* (New York 1929). On the American Lovestoneite Harry Wicks's attack on Cannon's drawing on Trotsky in an address before the Congress see the account of his British namesake, Harry Wicks, *Keeping My Head*, 102; Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 366, 434-435, 530-531 n. 72-73 citing Wicks, *International Press Correspondence*, 13 August 1928, 850; and H.M. Wicks, *Eclipse of October* (London 1958), v. Wicks would also appear before the final Political Committee 'hearings' at which Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern were eventually expelled and question Cannon on his Sixth Congress speech: Political Committee Minutes, 27 October 1928, Roll 2/R3345, Max Shachtman Papers, Tamiment Institute, New York University, New York, NY [hereafter MSP]. Hathaway and Stewart Smith, destined to play similar roles in the 1928 expulsion of Trotskyists in the United States and Canada, befriended one another at the Lenin School. See Smith, *Comrades and Komsomolkas*, 97. This latter source also suggests, rather fantastically, that Smith bested Spector in a public debate of the Canadian section at the Sixth Congress. Spector supposedly withdrew in pique and, realizing he would be criticized upon his return to Canada, facing the loss of his leadership role in the Party, turned to Trotskyism for an escape. (109-110)

⁴⁴The published version of Cannon's speech appeared in *International Press Correspondence*, 11 August 1928, and is reprinted (and dated 25 July 1928) as a transcript of that speech in "Against the Opportunism of the Lovestone Majority," *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*, 521-525. The actual transcript of the Cannon speech, dated 28 July 1928, is in "CI Congress, 7-28-28 — Comrade Cannon," Reel 6, Russian Center, PRL, and differs in the sharpness of its assault on the Lovestone leadership and in the pointedness of its conclusions, from the above published versions.

Bittelman and many other US opponents of the Lovestone leadership. But he continued to press the task of forming a "collective leadership." It was a fine point to be making, at the time, but it drew on Cannon's growing separation from many in the combined opposition, including those of his own faction, who had been too easily swept up in Stalinist manoeuvring that cavalierly castigated specific tendencies and positions as 'left' and 'right'. Bittelman had undoubtedly gravitated to the factional possibilities inherent in this process, claiming for his co-factionalists the historical status of the "Left group in the" Workers (Communist) Party. Cannon insisted on correcting the characterization, stressing that the combined Cannon-Foster group had developed "along a zig-zag line." Lovestone, Cannon claimed, had historically harboured ultra-left tendencies, but upon assuming the leadership of the American Party he had invariably tacked right. Such positions, couched in language that betrayed no hint of Cannon's emerging Trotskyism, must have seemed rather beside the point to many in the public US Opposition group, for whom it was a political convenience to label Lovestone a rightist. They nonetheless meshed well with a reading of Trotsky's *Draft Program* and separated Cannon out from the cynical adoption of 'left'/'right' phraseology that, by August, had overtaken the Sixth Congress vocabulary.⁴⁵ If these and other lessons were to be implemented programmatically, however, Cannon and Spector had to return to North America, their positions in the communist movement intact. And they had to retain possession of their copies of Trotsky's precious draft program, using them to recruit dissidents at home.

Reconfiguration

The American delegation departed the Sixth Congress in September 1928. They left more divided, and more precariously perched, *vis-à-vis* the Communist International, than when they arrived. All seemed uncertain. Jay Lovestone and Company remained at the helm, but this faction had overreached itself in siding with Bukharin, not so much out of principle as, in Cannon's words, 'guessing wrong'. When it came time, later in 1929, to call for Bukharin's head in order to placate Stalin and retain its hold on the American communist apparatus, the Lovestone group was quick to jump on the bandwagon of denunciation. But such mending of fences was not enough. Lovestone and Wolfe, in particular, had overstepped the bounds of Stalinist subservience at the Sixth Conference in rudely censorious dismissals of Lozovsky, then much favoured by Stalin, and through demanding a measure of financial independence from the Comintern. More ominously, Lovestone had brazenly challenged Stalin directly in the Seniorens Konvent, asking for clarification of the undercover Stalin-Bukharin fight, suggesting that the Russian Party's dirty linen be aired before a Comintern subcommittee. Lovestone, and by implication his

⁴⁵"Discussion of the Enlarged Anglo-American Secretariat," 17 August 1928, Reel 9, Russian Center, PRL.

entire faction, was now marked by Stalin for future demise. The Foster-Cannon group, which had mended some fences en route to the Sixth Congress in the hopes of uniting to defeat Lovestone was, however, finished, torn asunder by internal lack of agreement, its forces dispersed by Comintern appointment (Dunne and Earl Browder were dispatched to the Far East), its key factional leaders now isolated from their former followers, and tarnished by a failure to line up unambiguously behind Comintern dictate. Stalin, through interviews with both Lovestone and Foster, managed to keep both figures off their political balance, feeding them sweet nothings as to what was coming next. He danced them into political corners out of which they would never truly reappear, or in which they remained, wallflower-like, for years. Only the opportunistic Browder left the Sixth Congress in good graces, his strategic plague on all houses and orchestrated oscillations of outburst and occlusion an astutely calculated gamble on future dividends to be garnered in the quest for power within the now renamed Communist Party, USA.

Over the course of the summer, most of its leaders embroiled in the Sixth Congress factional fisticuffs, the American Party had itself been the site of increasing domestic hostilities, with Cannon group figures such as Tom O'Flaherty and Manuel Gomez facing disciplinary charges for financial and other improprieties. Leading the attack was the Lovestone hatchet-man, Jack Stachel; point man on the Cannon defence team was Martin Abern. These crudely factional assaults rankled because, while it faced such denigration within major Party committees, the Cannon faction had been carrying the bulk of communist mass work throughout the summer of 1928. Labour defence campaigns continued in the International Labor Defense, as did anti-imperialist work, and Arne Swabeck and others had been promoting a new and militant unionism among Illinois miners and textile workers. Coming home was clearly going to be no political picnic.⁴⁶

Having decided not to fight the battle for a Trotskyist program within the Sixth Congress itself, but to return to their native United States and Canada to build up the

⁴⁶Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History (1919-1957)* (Boston 1957), 164-169; Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 308-314; Morgan, *A Covert Life*, 73-76; Shipman [Gomez], *It Had To Be Revolution*, 153-169, 172-173; Gitlow, *I Confess*, 502-511; Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 208-209; James G. Ryan, *Earl Browder: The Failure of American Communism* (Tuscaloosa and London 1997), 35-37; Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism*, 243-247; Barrett, *Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism*, 157-162; Wolfe, *Life in Two Centuries*, 422-441; [No Author] to Dear Comrades, 2 August 1928; Dunne and Bittelman to Dear Comrades, 1 September 1928, all in Reel 9, Russian Center, PRL; Political Committee Minutes, 16, 23 July 1928, Reel 2d; and Harry to Manny, 10 August 1928, Reel 9, Russian Centre, PRL; "Motions Adopted by Control Commission Re Case Manuel Gomez, 19 October 1928," and the lengthy discussion recorded in Political Committee Minutes, 1 November 1928, Reel 2d, Russian Center, PRL; *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*, 68-69, 535-558; Swabeck, Unpublished autobiography, ch.11; and a series of Political Committee Minutes, July-September 1928, Reel 2d, PRL.

ranks of an effective Left Opposition, Cannon and Spector faced a difficult situation. They both knew that it was mandatory to 'smuggle' Trotsky's *Draft Program* out of the Soviet Union so that they could use the document to propagate the ideas of the Left Opposition among potential United States and Canadian converts. No doubt Cannon and Spector discussed loosely how they should proceed, but beyond this, it is not clear that either man had a well-thought-out understanding of what they would be doing, especially as to specific details. Each copy of the Trotsky draft was stamped "Read and Return to the Secretariat" and the numbering certainly suggested that Soviet officialdom was monitoring these Left Opposition pages relatively closely. Cannon and Spector had no way of knowing how rigorous a tally of the Trotskyist critique of Comintern fundamentals was being kept, but they had reason to suspect that leaving the Soviet Union without returning the official document to the Secretariat was going to be difficult. Both men, in the end, smuggled Trotsky's *Draft Program* out of Russia in September 1928, Spector carrying it with him to Europe as he attempted to build bridges to Opposition groups in France and Germany before returning to Toronto in the second week of October. Cannon, some 30 years later, did not remember that Spector had surreptitiously taken the marked translation of Trotsky with him, but trusted that Spector's claims to have done so, recounted to Draper in various communications/interviews in 1957-1959, should be accepted "without question." For his part, Cannon apparently relied on the aid of George Weston, a Trotskyist-leaning British delegate known as the "Mad Irishman" for his free talk of Left Opposition ideas at the Sixth Congress, in 'liberating' the *Draft Program* from its Stalinist incarceration. Rumour later had it that Weston, whose base of operations within the Comintern was labour-defence work in the International Red Aid (making him a logical candidate for collaboration with Cannon), managed to get hold of another numbered document, possibly pilfered from an Australian delegate, allowing Cannon to return his copy. Weston's wife, Mary Morris, then removed the insides of her son's teddy bear, placed Trotsky's writings within the re-stuffed animal, and passed the pamphlet back to Cannon at a pre-arranged meeting in Berlin, from which Cannon departed for the United States, arriving home 23 September 1928. There would later be anguished cries from Comintern quarters of the "illegal means" undertaken to circulate Trotsky's draft, "thereby endangering the proletarian dictatorship."⁴⁷

⁴⁷On this episode of smuggling Trotsky's *Draft Program* out of the Soviet Union, on which Cannon was relatively tight-lipped throughout his life, see Sam Gordon in Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 55-56; Wicks, *Keeping My Head*, 158-159; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 152-155; Shachtman, "Twenty-Five Years of American Trotskyism," 16; Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 141; Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 220-221; Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 367; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 51; Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 440; Bornstein and Richardson, *Against the Stream*, 37, 64; *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*, 64.

Cannon: Converting Comrades

Such shots across the polemical bow paled in comparison to what was in store for Cannon and Spector in their respective Communist Parties. Cannon first shared Trotsky's *Draft Program* with his lover, Rose Karsner. Rose, who modestly stated that she did "not grasp its full implications," nevertheless quickly assimilated "the essence"; to her it was as if "at last light [had] been thrown on the troubles" the American section had lived through with the Comintern. According to Jim, Rose "never faltered from that day" until her death in the 1960s. With only a solitary copy of the document, no way of duplicating it, and conscious of the dangers of exposing themselves prematurely to a full-scale Party attack, Cannon and Karsner proceeded cautiously: "The only way we could operate was to get hold of carefully selected individuals, arouse enough interest, and then persuade them to come to the house and read the document.... We got a few people together and they helped us to spread the gospel to wider circles." It was, in Cannon's words, "A long and toilsome process."

Cannon's and Karsner's quarters at this time, a flat in New York's Second Avenue and 19th Street district, were modest to the point of spartan, and one by one, a few trusted comrades from the Cannon faction were brought to the apartment and sat down with Trotsky's *Draft Program*. The first were Cannon's closest co-workers in the International Labor Defense, the youthful, but seasoned communist factionalists, Shachtman and Martin Abern. This duo was later expanded to include the long-time Cannon ally and former editor of the *Daily Worker* and the *Labor Defender*, Chicago-based and increasingly disaffected, Tom O'Flaherty. Shachtman later recalled "the absolutely shattering effect upon my inexcusable indifference to the fight in the Russian Party, upon my smug ignorance about the issues involved, upon my sense of shame, that was produced by the first reading of Trotsky's classic, *Critique of the Draft Program of the Comintern*." Leaving aside the hyperbole of a language of 'shock' and an exaggerated and distorting assertion of ignorance on important issues, born of a disingenuous later attempt to paint the Cannon faction in its entirety as programatically obtuse (Shachtman himself had been an architect of the group's assimilation to the Stalinist smokescreens around the Chinese Revolution), this remembrance rightly accents the political impact of finally being confronted with a critique of communist practice premised on fundamentals of Marxist analysis. The air within the Cannon-Karsner household, and possibly in selected neighbourhood cafés and restaurants, was now alive with animated conversation among the small group for whom Trotsky's writing opened up an appreciation of how a Comintern theoretical degeneration into the limitations of 'socialism in one country' might explain, coincident with the conservatizing pressures of the United States context, the sorry capitulations, compromises, and ultimate collapse of American communism as a revolutionary force. "Never has a movement of social idealism suffered such a moral catastrophe, such a rotting away of its human material," Cannon wrote with some bitterness in the fall of 1954. Within three or four days after his arrival in New York from the Soviet Union, Can-

non, Karsner, Shachtman, and Abern had an agreement to “start the fight” for a Left Opposition within the Communist Party. It was not destined to go more than a round or two.⁴⁸

But in a matter of weeks, Cannon and his small band of clandestine Oppositionists had made pivotal strides forward, securing Party mailing lists, connecting with isolated dissidents such as Boston’s Antoinette Konikow, reaching into enclaves in the midwest in Chicago and Minneapolis, cultivating some small pockets of support in the foreign language sections, and securing modest financial aid from Cannon’s old friend, Max Eastman, who donated royalties from his collection of Trotskyist documents, *The Real Situation in Russia* (1928), to the publication program of the American Left Opposition. In Canada, Spector was able to make less headway.

Spector: Assembling an Analysis

Spector returned to Toronto on 9 October 1928. His later arrival meant that he had less time to build support than Cannon, and the days lost were clearly pivotal. Once the Left Opposition cat was out of the political bag, both Spector and Cannon knew the established Party leaderships would move against them decisively. Cannon detailed his minor successes in a letter to Spector. The Canadian revolutionary was steeled by reading Eastman’s translation of the correspondence between Trotsky and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union [CPSU], published as “Stalin Falsifies History,” suggesting the importance of republishing the documents appearing in *The Real Situation in Russia* in cheap and popular editions, as had been done in France and Germany. Translation into Yiddish and other languages he thought “would be very effective in rallying support to us.” Full of “cheerful surprise” that Cannon had managed to win four critical comrades to the cause, Spector promised to “send a complete list of the literature” he had obtained in Europe, and to begin the job of translating material from French and German. Now in possession of various bulletins, statements, platforms, and files, assembling dissident communist mate-

⁴⁸Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 220-226, and also 15-34, which reprints Cannon’s article, “The Degeneration of the Communist Party — and the New Beginning,” *Fourth International*, 15 (Fall 1954), 121-127; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 52; Evelyn Reed, “Rose Karsner Cannon is Dead, A Foremost Woman Trotskyist,” *The Militant*, 18 March 1968; Sam Gordon in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 57; Shachtman, “Twenty-Five Years of American Trotskyism,” 15; “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 152-156; Harry Ring interview with James P. Cannon, 24 October 1973, 11 [in possession of the author]. *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*, 66, rightly points out that Shachtman published three articles on China in various Workers (Communist) Party publications in 1925 and 1927, as well as going on an International Labor Defense speaking tour on China in the spring of 1928. See also Drucker, *Shachtman and His Left*, 36-47, and Cannon’s comments on Shachtman, China, and Trotskyism in Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 240.

rial produced by an array of figures and incipient movements, including France's Boris Souvarine and Germany's Hugo Urbahns, early proponents that the USSR had become a "state capitalist" society, the Belgian and Russian Oppositions, and the Italian Bordigists, Spector's quest for the documents of European debate had yielded much to digest. The Canadian Marxist had obviously grabbed whatever he could, indiscriminately, in what was a quick canvassing of the situation. Assimilating the lessons of this cache of literature would come later. Spector's brief sojourn in Europe also allowed him to establish cursory contact with Urbahns, a leader of the German left-wing along with Arkadi Maslow and Ruth Fisher, and spend a day in Paris, scouting out a highly fractured set of Oppositional forces. All of this simply reinforced his appreciation of "the crisis in the International." The pivotal German Party he thought split into four factions, corrupt and spent, and, "Anybody who dares discuss or criticize except in the official channels, is driven out of the Party." Spector was now more convinced than ever that Cannon's "decision to come out with the fundamental program is, I believe, correct." Having thought the matter over in Europe, the Canadian Left Oppositionist could not "see any reality in a fight on a limited program."

But as would be apparent in the next weeks, Spector was unable to move past these critical beginnings to reproduce Cannon's modest organizational achievements in New York. He had no Eastman to draw on for funds, and while committing himself to a pledge of \$1,000, Spector was "absolutely broke at the moment," could not see getting to New York for a meeting in the near future, and expected to be fired from his Party post at any time. Unlike Cannon Spector had, after a few weeks back in Canada, failed to win pivotal recruits, and could not manage to pry from the Communist Party of Canada [CPC] any mailing lists of significance, as they were "kept under lock and key all the time I have been in the city." November correspondence from Cannon or Shachtman expressed uneasiness that Spector had not responded to previous admonitions to get his hands on such addresses, which were a practical preparation of immense importance. The slightly more than two weeks that Cannon preceded Spector in his return to North America seemed a critical breathing space for activity that allowed Cannon to take steps that Spector simply could not, or perhaps neglected to treat with the proper regard.⁴⁹

⁴⁹The Cannon-Spector correspondence of this period was part of a documentary record burglarized from the Cannon-Karsner apartment in two separate Lovestone-orchestrated raids, one of 23 December 1928, in which the thieves were disturbed in the midst of their work, and another, which finished the job, on 14 January 1929. Sections of letters were reproduced in both the United States and Canadian communist press, and the correspondence itself ended up in Jay Lovestone's files and in Moscow, some of which I draw on in the above paragraphs and below. For the theft of documents see Jack Stachel, "Report to the Political Committee," 25 December 1928, in *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*, 561-571; Gitlow, *I Confess*, 491; Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 372, 517-518, n. 39; Ring interview with Cannon, 24 October 1973, 11-13; Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 209; "A Burglary — Its Political Meaning," *The Militant*, 1 January 1929; *Daily*

Reaction & Recruitment in the United States

In the interval the forces resistant to the Left Opposition were beginning to appreciate that a revolt needed to be nipped in the bud. Just how to do this, however, in the factional context of the United States Party, with Lovestone cognizant of the political capital to be gained by painting Foster and his faction as in cahoots with a renegade Trotskyist such as Cannon, complicated the situation greatly. As a result the *fait accompli* of the expulsion of Cannon and his supporters was delayed. Eventually, after a set of mid-October 1928 'hearings', Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern were given the bounce. As Cannon recalled, "We were expelled and out of there a few minutes later. The 'jury' didn't bother to leave the box." The next day the small nucleus of Trotskyists had a mimeographed "statement circulating throughout the party."⁵⁰

Worker, 27 December 1929; *The Worker*, 19 January 1929. Quotations in the above paragraph from these sources as well as: Spector to Cannon, 9, 16 October 1928; Mit Gruss to Spector, 5 November 1928, Reel 6; Spector to Cannon, 7 November 1928, Reel 9, Russian Center, PRL. Ian McKay, "Revolution Deferred," cites Maurice Spector to James P. Cannon, 27 November 1928, Jay Lovestone Papers, Hoover Institute on War, Revolution, and Peace, Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA, Box 430, Folder "James P. Cannon," listing thirteen specific sets of documents Spector brought back from Europe. On European currents of dissidence within the Comintern in this period see Franz Borkenau, *World Communism: A History of the Communist International* (Ann Arbor, MI 1962); Ruth Fischer, *Stalin and German Communism: A Study in the Origins of the State Party* (Cambridge 1948).

⁵⁰Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 371; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 54-55; Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 223; Political Committee Minutes, 27 October 1928, Roll 2/R3345, MSP, which also contain a draft of the Cannon, Shachtman, Abern statement and a copy of the letter Cannon wrote to comrades on 28 October 1928, explaining the expulsion and appealing for the creation of an American Left Opposition, subsequently published in *The Militant*. Announcement in the Communist Party press was delayed for more than two weeks, until after the Presidential election campaign. See *Daily Worker*, 16 November 1926, which contains the official Party position, "The Struggle Against Trotskyism and the Right Danger," as well as the Cannon, Shachtman, Abern statement to the Political Committee. For the full statement see "For the Russian Opposition!" and "Concerning Our Expulsion," *The Militant*, 15 November 1928. Cannon's final statements before the hearings acknowledged past doubts over Trotskyism, but stated unequivocally that the struggle for Trotskyism is now the only course, and that the Foster opposition to Lovestone's rightward trajectory can only lead to assimilation to the very Right Danger it supposedly resists. See Cannon, "I Stand on My Record," *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*, 526-534. For their part, the Foster-Bittelman-Aronberg group, having done Lovestone's bidding in ridding the Communist Party of Cannon, was reduced to begging the Comintern to rectify what to them was an unacceptable outcome of the 'hearings' they had brought into being, cabling Moscow: "Polcom Majority refuses to publish Minority statement against Trotskyism and Right Danger while at same time carries on widespread campaign against us as Trotskyites. This is part of general

A national mass mailing of their programmatic statement was accompanied by a 28 October open letter from Cannon to all Party Members. In it Cannon explained that he, Shachtman, and Abern had endorsed the platform of the Russian Opposition, that they had been expelled by the Political Committee, which refused to publish their documents of dissidence. Adamant that, as communists, they were bound to the Communist Party even as its leading body had expelled them, Cannon committed himself, Shachtman, and Abern to fight for the ideas of Trotskyism and reinstatement to the Communist Party, asking for support from all who shared their views. In a key passage, Cannon linked the suppression of the struggle for thought and program in the Party to its bureaucratic degeneration:

These methods tend to transform the Party from a living body of revolutionaries into an institution which makes thought unlawful.... That is the meaning of the atmosphere created in the unscrupulous and demagogic struggle against Trotsky and the Russian Opposition during the past five years. The proletarian masses of the Party must awaken to this danger and take up the fight against it. They must break through the bureaucratic crust that has formed itself on top of the Party. They must demand full information on all sides of the question so that they can decide for themselves intelligently and not merely from wrong and non-Leninist conceptions of formal discipline.

Emphasizing “from the very beginning that [the central issue was] not simply a question of democracy,” the Cannon Opposition stressed “the program of Marxism.” Utilizing the discontent around the lack of inner Party democracy that the Konikow forces in Boston had accented, Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern consciously strove to “get a sympathetic hearing and then immediately began pounding away on the rightness of Trotskyism on all the political questions.”⁵¹

By the time the full and conflicting accounts of the expulsion appeared in newsprint, statements being published in both the *Daily Worker* and the new Trotskyist propaganda organ, *The Militant*, in mid-November, a new chapter in the history of the American revolutionary left had commenced. Lovestone’s lieutenant, Bertram Wolfe, dubbed Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern the “three Generals without an Army.” The characterization was not all that far off the mark, although its condescending male chauvinism, characteristic of the ‘hearings’ and expulsions as a whole, wrote one crucial player, Rose Karsner, entirely out of the political war. Cannon recalled that he, Shachtman, and Abern “felt pretty lonely” as they departed, for the last time, the Political Committee meeting of 27 October 1928. But the slightly-more-than-two-week interval separating the technical expulsion of Cannon and his comrades from the public announcement to the Party ranks was

plan to crush minority and solidify right wing.” See Foster, Bittelman, Aronberg to Plathnick/Comintern/Moscow, 24 November 1928, Reel 9, Russian Center, PRL.

⁵¹James P. Cannon to the Party Members, 28 October 1928, Reel 2d, Russian Center, PRL; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 57.

something of a lull before the ugly storm that would eventually overwhelm the Trotskyist effort to create a Left Opposition appealing to the Communist Party's membership. In these weeks, *The Militant* was launched, funded by Eastman and some Chicago comrades, printed by an old Italian Wobbly, Joe Cannata, who both suggested the name and was generous in extending credit to the dissident communists. Orienting toward rank-and-file communists, the Trotskyist opposition flogged leaflets and the first issue of *The Militant*, which appeared before its publication date of 15 November 1928, outside Communist Party headquarters, where they met with a mixed, but non-violent, reception. Shachtman recalled that the original response was anything but virulent: old friends and comrades would talk about issues of political program; while some were hostile, there appeared to be openings to discuss Trotskyist criticisms, and it was possible to sell papers to Party members.⁵²

As the word spread of the existence of the Cannon-Shachtman-Abern-Karsner endorsement of Trotsky, recruits came their way, largely by ones and twos, occasionally in small groups. Cannon thought them a veritable army when they declared their adherence to the program of the Left Opposition. This modest recruitment proceeded in the first week of November, with documents being sent to contacts in the midwest strongholds of Minneapolis and Chicago, and the mining milieu, where Cannon had decade-old contacts among local militants. Some of it elicited positive responses, a miner long associated with opposition to the John L. Lewis trade union bureaucracy writing: "It shows once more the necessity of rank and file rule instead of a few leaders whom can utilize their positions for personal advantage and machine rule.... The slogans must be as in the old UMW: — 'Save the Party!' 'Lovestoneism must go!' 'For a Communist Party of the Workers!'"⁵³

With Cannon and the Left Opposition appearing to gain ground, Lovestone moved off the stand of relative moderation he had found useful to occupy, for anti-Foster factional purposes, during the Political Committee 'hearings' reviewing the charges against Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern. Pepper, writing under the name of Swift, called for "the complete liquidation of Trotskyism in the Party," likening the Left Opposition to "an openly counter-revolutionary Social Democratic

⁵²Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 55; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 170-175.

⁵³Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 55-58; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 170-175; Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 372; William Z. Foster, *History of the Communist Party of the United States* (New York 1952), 270; Gerry Allard to Shachtman, Cannon, and Abern, 4 November 1928, Frederick, CO; Joe Giganti to Marty [Abern], 4 November 1928; Joseph Giganti to Political Committee, Workers (Communist) Party, New York, Chicago, 24 January 1929 [misdated 1928], all correspondence in Reel 9, Russian Center, PRL; Gitlow, *I Confess*, 571, estimates the number of Trotskyists drawn to Cannon in this period as about 50. On Bordiga see Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 586-587; E.H. Carr, *Twilight of the Comintern, 1930-1935* (New York 1982), 240-244.

ideology.” The Comintern official continued: “The Trotskyist group around Cannon, Lore, and Eastman is an open ally of the capitalists, the Government, the Socialist Party, the A.F. of L., in their attempts to destroy the Communist Party.” Cannon and Company were now “renegades,” a counter-revolutionary conspiracy, and it was necessary to cut off all relations with them. Philadelphia communist, Herbert Benjamin, described the worsening climate of late 1928: “All friendships were completely ended, terminated, broken up, and so on, and there was no talking. And finally there were violent attacks upon the Trotskyists ... attempts to prevent them from holding meetings of any kind, of seizing their records, seizing any properties.... It was the most ruthless and unethical kind of action, and was considered tolerable, permissible, in your relations with opponents.” Shachtman later expressed his incredulity at how quickly the Lovestone machine orchestrated a campaign of violence, meant to create an atmosphere in which the Trotskyists were ostracized as a diseased contingent, contact with which was prohibited for all rank-and-file communists. Most disturbing were the organized groups of New York Party members, often wielding furriers’ knives, forming vigilante squads that would jostle and threaten the expelled Oppositionists on public streets as they distributed literature and hawked the Trotskyist press. Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern now faced resistance and resentment that crossed over into the territory of violence and physical intimidation.⁵⁴

Spector’s Stand

Lovestone’s determined campaign to rid the United States Communist Party of Trotskyists reached into Canada, where, predictably enough, it caught up with Maurice Spector. Upon his return from the Comintern’s Sixth Congress, Spector had pursued a course similar to that of Cannon, albeit in more acute isolation. Rather than reveal himself fully to those all too ready to pounce, he opted for evasions and said little that would paint him into the uncomfortable corner of Trotskyism. But he was not about to offer endorsement of anti-Trotskyism either, or falsify his judgements about the political situation in the Soviet Union. Spector initiated “tentative conversations and discussions with the comrades who have been looking to me for leadership against the present incompetent and centrist regime in the party,” a youthful cohort disaffected with Jack MacDonald, and centred in the energetic trio of Beckie Buhay, Oscar Ryan, and Charlie Marriot, all of whom would eventually gravitate to Tim Buck. Marriot, regarded as a leading literary figure in the YCL, had been present in Moscow during the Sixth Congress, and was known to both Cannon and Spector as someone who leaned favourably toward the

⁵⁴Pepper/Swift, “Statement Proposed by Swift,” [November 1928?], Reel 2d, Russian Center, PRL; Herbert Benjamin, Outline of Unpublished Manuscript, “A History of the Unemployed Movement and Its Struggles During the Great Depression,” in Columbia Oral History Project, Interview with Roger Goodman, 1975, 107-110; “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 176; Arne Swabeck, Unpublished autobiography, ch. 13.

possibility of a Left Opposition. But no Trotskyist nucleus would be forged out of such “friends.” For by mid-to-late October, no more than two-and-a-half weeks after his return from Europe, Spector concluded with disappointment that while such comrades were reluctantly willing to read the materials of the Opposition, they were to a person unreceptive to Spector’s having introduced “this international complication.” Their dissidence was, in short, largely understood as a domestic discontent. Buhay, Ryan, and Marriot apparently thought the best political chance for a fight lay on the ground of national struggle, where the Party’s morale was low, rank-and-file appreciation of issues was appallingly underdeveloped, personalized factions existed in every city, expulsions of branches and individuals had curtailed Party activity, and bitterness had overtaken entire sections, such as the powerful Ukrainian group. Spector saw little hope of such material ever jelling into a true Left Opposition. He warned Cannon not to expect much from those he had around him. They were apparently of a different cast than Shachtman and Abern: “Even when they admitted the dark side of the present CI regime, they tended to consider ‘Russian Questions’ as too delicate and involved for any but the Russian Party to resolve.” Those comrades prepared to work with Spector, then, were fixated on “Canadian problems” to the detriment of a larger political analysis, “mortally afraid of being labelled ‘Trotskyists’.” The only individual who had actually previously expressed positive and open views on the Left Opposition while in Russia, Charlie Marriot, quickly “sobered up” upon his return to Canada, castigating the struggle for Trotskyism as futile, and clamming up on all serious discussion with Spector; he would later leave the lies about his older comrade, circulated as the Party hierarchy attacked Spector, unrefuted.⁵⁵

At an Enlarged Executive Committee meeting of the Workers Party, 20-22 October 1928, which involved all of the leading Party cadre, Secretary Jack MacDonald, almost certainly by then in contact with Jay Lovestone, delivered a five-hour address endorsing each and every one of the recent Sixth Congress Comintern decisions. Spector, by this time, had come to regard MacDonald as a reflection of what was wrong with Canadian communism, dubbing him “a barnacle on the ship” of revolution, little more than a “trade-union I.L.P.er with the most meagre equipment

⁵⁵ As background see Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 208-210; Rodney, *Soldiers of International*, 141-143. Note the account of a supposed meeting, ostensibly including Beckie Buhay, at which there was talk by Spector of him leading an opposition, detailed by Communist Party loyalist Robert Shoesmith in *The Worker*, 19 January 1929. Stewart Smith alludes to Spector’s factional courting of Buhay and Carr, and MacDonald’s resentments, in *Comrades and Komsomolkas*, 108, and there is discussion of Charlie Marriot and of Young Communist League members’ disdain for MacDonald, as well as talk of the ostensible Trotskyism of Spector late in 1928 in Minerva Davis, *The Wretched of the Earth and Me* (Toronto 1992), 66-71, 110, 125. On Spector’s assessments in early-to-mid-October 1928 see Spector to Cannon, 9 October 1928; 16 October 1928; 31 October-1 November 1928; Mit Gruss to Spector, 5 November 1928, Reel 6; Spector to Cannon, 3 December 1928, Reel 2d, Russian Center, PRL.

of Marxism imaginable.” The two Party leaders barely spoke. MacDonald concluded his address to the assemblage coyly and provocatively, perhaps fixing his eye on Spector. “Is there any Trotskyism in the Canadian Party,” he asked rhetorically, adding for measure, “it would be a funny party that had no Trotskyism in it.” Spector dodged a number of bullets that could well have had his name on them, putting in what he wrote to Cannon were “some bad moments nevertheless.” He managed to evade one resolution that included the usual cant on Trotskyism, and when his silence on the Russian and international questions proved deafening, he was obliged, given the pleadings of one “friendly delegate,” to offer a few “guarded comments on the Chinese Revolution and grain crisis and the situation on the parties of the C.I.” But Spector avoided all mention of the Russian Opposition and kept his political irons in the live fires of the Canadian Party.⁵⁶

The first smoking out of the ECCI representative and Chairman of the Party occurred a few days later, however, at a 25 October public meeting in Toronto’s Alhambra Hall, with Spector designated as the featured speaker, addressing “The Soviet Union and the War Danger.” Chaired by Tim Buck, the forum drew a largely Jewish audience, not uncommon when Spector was speaking, and Jack MacDonald also offered some words on the subject. According to the ‘secret report’ of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, nothing untoward happened at Alhambra Hall, although, to be sure, the spy might not have caught the nuances of difference that now separated the public statements of clandestine Trotskyists and aspiring Stalinists. But it is noteworthy that the police account stresses that Buck, MacDonald, and Spector were largely on the same wavelength, particularly with respect to the war danger and the need to defend the Soviet Union. The report also confirms Spector’s later version of what he actually said. He apparently talked for about an hour, presenting a view of the successes of the Soviet Union as well as a “sober economic analysis” of the agricultural crisis and the menacing problem of class differentiation in the countryside. Buck and official Party mythology in Canada would eventually come to construct this meeting as Spector’s ‘coming out’ endorsement of Trotskyism, and reconfigure various individual roles in the mythic exposure of this political ‘fact’, but in actuality both Spector’s speech and the response of future Canadian Stalinists was much less than this. In the closet Trotskyist’s view, he had merely given those who had “come chiefly to cheer” something to go away and think about.

⁵⁶See Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 208-210; Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 141-143. These sources remain the most explicit on the Party events of this period, but I follow events, and date them accordingly, differing at times from the above accounts, through Spector correspondence. Rodney, for instance, misdates the Enlarged Executive meeting by a week. (142) See, for Spector’s account, Spector to Cannon, 31 October-1 November 1928, Reel 6, Russian Center, PRL; and for MacDonald: J. MacDonald, “The Sixth Congress of the C.I.,” *Canadian Labour Monthly*, 1 (November 1928), 3-12.

Thinking was not what was on other minds, however. Whether there was a sense that Spector's speech had not cheered enough, and that was grounds for suspicion, or whether, as a police report based on access to inner circles of the Communist Party of Canada would claim, in mid-November 1928, that Spector's recent movements in Germany had been monitored by the 'Soviet espionage system', which reported to Canadian communist leaders that Spector "was followed and traced to a meeting place where friends of Trotsky met," the result was that Spector was now operating on borrowed time. Buhay, Ryan, and Marriot, intent on skewering MacDonald, now saw Spector as a liability. They "cut Spector dead" and began to cuddle up to Buck, who raised the nature of the Alhambra Hall speech at a meeting of the Secretariat a few days later. Complaining quietly (he explicitly asked that his remarks not go in the record), he expressed discomfort with the "disproportionate amount of space" Spector had devoted to what Buck nebulously called "the Difficulties." By the end of the month Spector had received a letter from the Toronto City Committee of the Party, signed by Beckie Buhay, disapproving of his talk, which had not been reported on in *The Worker*, and assigning him to a November Party speech in which he would be expected to carry a different tune.⁵⁷

Things were now moving extremely fast, and they would scuttle a Cannon plan to have Spector utilize his ECCI post to write a letter of protest against the New York expulsions and then come out openly for a Trotskyist Left Opposition and align with those putting out *The Militant*. On 1 November MacDonald received a cable from Lovestone calling on the Canadian Workers Party to endorse the expulsions of Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern. Spector sought Cannon's advice on what to do when faced with the inevitable resolution: "Advise evasion if necessary abstention but under no circumstances endorse expulsion," Cannon scrawled. Spector knew his days as a Party leader were now numbered: "From the little that Buck has said," he wrote to Cannon on Halloween Eve, "I believe that abstention will be considered tantamount to opposition. The consequences are obvious." The regular Monday Political Committee meeting convened on 5 November 1928, with the issue of Spector a prime consideration.

Spector was thoroughly isolated, and the inner Party dynamics were very different than those confronted by Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern in the United

⁵⁷See Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 210-222; Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 142-144; and the unreliable account in Buck, *Thirty Years*, 64-65. Angus suggests that Buck, in an effort to place himself at the centre of Party developments, concocted his role as Chair of the Alhambra Hall meeting (220), but Buck's role is confirmed in a source with little reason to misstate the person presiding: CSIS/Spector, H.Q. Ref. 175/P172 (?), "Report Re: Communist Meeting ... [illegible]," Toronto, 30 October 1928. This source also presents a view of Spector's remarks remarkably similar to that presented in Spector to Cannon, 31 October-1 November 1928, Reel 6, Russian Center, PRL. For the police report on Spector being the subject of Soviet espionage see CSIS/Spector, H.Q. Ref. No. 'O' Division, 6/51, 15 November 1928, Toronto.

States. Little history of organized factionalism had been evident in the Canadian Workers Party up to this point (at least when compared to the situation in the United States), and while MacDonald, Buck, and others had their particular axes to grind, Spector thought they had little enthusiasm for removing him, knowing that a Party as weak at the political centre as was the Canadian Party needed the particular talents Spector brought to his posts, especially his editorial work with the Party press. But “the little Lenin-School apparatchik [Stewart] Smith” was now back in Canada, having been briefed in New York by Lovestone, and was making much noise about waging “an aggressive campaign against Trotskyism” and singing “a big song about my being in possession of certain confidential documents.” Indeed, Canadian communism late in 1928 came remarkably close to confirming the sorry prediction attributed to the Italian Marxist, Palmiro Togliatti, at roughly the same time: “If we don’t give in, Moscow won’t hesitate to fix up a left leadership with some kid out of the Lenin School.” Judgements of what constituted ‘left’ leadership aside, the Canadian situation in November 1928 was thus not amenable to much that Spector and his New York allies could look forward to, with the former assuring the latter that there was no political material to be had among the Polcom and the CEC, and his failure to secure recruits should not be “put down necessarily to lack of organizing ability on [his] part,” as Spector anticipated Cannon “possibly may.” At the actual 5 November resolution ramming, Spector held on for an entire day. Communications from Lovestone were discussed, including the decision to expel the New York Trotskyists, and the Cannon, Shachtman, Abern declaration in support of the Russian Opposition was passed around. Then came the lining up, with Spector pressured to declare himself:

Mac & Co were insistent on a showdown. My past silences, abstentions from voting and half-hearted affirmations of Trotskyism, were all gone over and it was pointed out in the best inquisitorial fashion, that I must say, yea or nay to a series of questions that were drawn up....

Was I prepared to condemn the ideological line of Trotskyism and wage an aggressive campaign against ‘it’? Was I prepared to wage a campaign against the disruptive actions of Cannon, Schachtman [*sic*], and Abern and more like these. I refused to answer by a yes or a no and after haggling all afternoon, I proposed and it was agreed to over the objections of MacDonald, that I be permitted to make a statement the next day.⁵⁸

Spector tabled a nine-page typewritten statement, addressed to the Political Committee of the Communist Party of Canada, on 6 November 1928. He commit-

⁵⁸See for Lovestone’s cable, Typescript of Telegram, Spector to Cannon, 240 East 19th Street, 1 November 1928 [misdated 1 October 1928], which also contains Typescript of Cannon’s Note In Reply; and for other relevant communication: Spector to Cannon, 31 October-1 November 1928; Cannon to Spector, 5 November 1928, Reel 6; Spector to Cannon, 7 November 1928, Russian Center, PRL. The Togliatti statement, dated in 1929 and relating to the ‘Third Period’ turn of the Communist International, appears in E.J. Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays* (New York 1973), 50.

ted himself to wage a resolute campaign for Leninism, provided an elaborate critique of Comintern policy that reached from the 1923 German crisis, through the thwarted Chinese Revolution and British General Strike of 1925-1927, into agrarian questions in Russia and the suppression of the Opposition. Of all the documents generated by the expulsion of avowed North American Trotskyists in October and November 1928, Spector's letter was perhaps the most detailed and coherent articulation of the politics of the Left Opposition. Condemning the Comintern's consistent opportunism, which was invariably based on "maneuvers with the Reformists at the top instead of regard for the unleashing of the mass movement below," Spector located the social basis of such deviation from programmatic principle in:

the retardation of the World Revolution, the relative stabilization of Capitalism, the defeats in China, Germany, Great Britain, Bulgaria, etc., and the difficulties of socialist construction in the USSR [which] have exercised their telling influence, and have provoked a desire upon the part of certain elements in the RCP to follow the line of lesser resistance, to solve the difficulties, National and International, not by the harder road of hewing to Leninism, but by the apparently easier theory of 'socialism in one country'.... From the economic point of view it is a Utopian mirage for which neither Marx nor Engels nor Lenin are responsible, and the program of the Comintern will never be a completely correct guide to the revolutionary movement unless it breaks from this theory.

Entirely clear that his struggle was with the Revolutionary Communist movement and through the Communist International and its sections, Spector signed what was in effect his inevitable expulsion order with the words, "Long Live the Proletarian Revolution!" He was immediately removed from all Party assignments and suspended from the Communist Party of Canada pending a further review.

At the 11 November 1928 Central Executive Committee meeting the neophyte Stewart Smith led the attack, castigating Spector's class mettle, denigrating his Marxism. Like Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern, Spector was now expelled. The dubious icing was put on this cajoling cake on 22 December 1928 as the Anglo-American Secretariat, led by the British Canadian Tom Bell and Lovestone appointment Louis Engdahl, reported on the expulsion and formally stripped Spector of the ECCI seat that was already long gone. Across Canada, in late November and throughout December, the labour world was abuzz with word of Spector being drubbed out of the CPC. The Party took great offence at Spector's expulsion receiving coverage in *The Globe*, it being claimed the Left Oppositionist had turned to the voice of bourgeois power in Canada. Over the course of the next month, as had happened in the United States, communist officialdom's attempts to put the screws to potential Spector allies drove a few brave souls, who refused to endorse his expulsion and demanded instead Party reinstatement, into the Left Opposition camp. By mid-December a dozen Canadian comrades had been turfed. They were joined by a handful of other non-Party members who were willing to subscribe to *The Militant*, including a radical young lawyer, J.L. Cohen, who would figure prominently in the

legal struggles of communists and workers over the course of the next two decades. Spector thought a group of 25-30 might crystallize in Toronto, and Cannon was soon reporting to American comrades that "Spector is making headway and already has a solid group with him."⁵⁹

Trotskyism in Canada, 1929-1937: A Sober Assessment

This was the cart of revolutionary optimism running ahead of the horse of sober pessimism of intellect and organizational judgement. For in actuality, Spector's attempts to recruit committed Canadian revolutionaries to the programmatic cause of the international Left Opposition stalled and, compared to the admittedly meagre accomplishments of Cannon in the same endeavour in the United States, sputtered. Having failed to win Buhay, Ryan, and Marriot to his positions, Spector's expulsion saw very little in the way of an exodus of critical cadre from the Canadian Party. Barely a baker's half dozen were initially expelled along with the Party's leading intellectual.⁶⁰ Experienced comrades, such as Annie Buller, who had long-established working relations with Spector and often expressed admiration for his talents, were quickly assimilated to a Party loyalism that broached no questioning of the programmatic issues at stake in what was now a titanic struggle pitting entrenched Stalinism against the upstart Trotskyist forces of 'coun-

⁵⁹ Above paragraphs rely on Spector to Cannon, 31 October-1 November 1928; Mit Gruss to Spector, 5 November 1928, Reel 6; Spector to Cannon, 7 November 1928; Cables, Spector to Cannon, 8, 9, 12, 14 November 1928; [No Author] to F.J. Flatman, Hamilton, 20 November 1928; Cannon to Spector, 1 December 1928; Spector to Cannon, 27 November 1928; 3, 5, 6, 10, 14 December 1928; Cannon to Spector, 20 December 1928; Transcript of Letter, Cannon to Cowl, [November/December 1928], Reel 2d; Meeting of the Anglo-American Secretariat, 22 December 1928, Reel 9, Russian Center, PRL; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 63; Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 373; Smith, *Comrades and Komsomolkas*, 110-111. Spector's 6 November 1928 Letter to the Political Committee appears in full in Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 356-362, with commentary on 211-214; it is also present in CSIS/Spector, H.Q. Ref. 175/P1712, a typescript of Spector's letter headed: "What were questions. — What caused this?" For the notice of expulsion see "The Communist Party of Canada Maintains Leninist Ideological Clarity," *The Worker*, 24 November 1928. For commentary on the expulsion see "Spector Expelled; Communists Divide Throughout the World," *Globe*, 13 November 1928, clipping in CSIS/Spector, as well as H.Q. Ref. 175/P 1712, 'O' Division, 6/51, "Re: Maurice Spector," citing clipping from *Mail and Empire*, 15 November 1928; *Globe*, 14 November 1928; *OBU Bulletin*, 29 November 1928; *Labour Leader*, 16 November 1928; *Canadian Labor World*, 28 November 1928. On J.L. Cohen see Laurel Sefton MacDowell, *Renegade Lawyer: The Life of J.L. Cohen* (Toronto 1971). For variants of the Stalinist position on Spector's expulsion, which lack credibility as to both factual and interpretive issues, see Buck, *Yours in the Struggle*, 46-51; Stewart Smith, "Demagoguery Versus the Communist Party," *Canadian Labour Monthly*, 2 (January 1929), 10-18, esp. 12.

⁶⁰ *The Worker*, 26 January 1929.

ter-revolution'. Buller wrote to the Communist poet, Joe Wallace, early in 1929: "we all got a shock about Spector. He is lost to our cause. So much for M."⁶¹ As expulsions escalated into January 1929, it nevertheless remained the case that a number of those driven from the ranks of Canadian communism in the Trotskyist witch hunt did not gravitate to Spector and the program of the Left Opposition.⁶²

There is evidence, from two divergent streams within the early Canadian Trotskyist movement, that Spector dropped a pivotal organizational ball, failing to capitalize on a significant momentum toward the Left Opposition on the part of a large contingent of disaffected Jewish youth in the Young Communist League. Maurice Quarter, later a Spector factional ally and loyalist, claimed that immediately following Spector's expulsion in late 1928, a caucus of the YCL approached the former Party leader to come to a meeting and explain the politics behind the Trotsky-Stalin fight. According to Quarter, 40-50 people took the brave step of convening, knowing that they could well face expulsion as a consequence. The Canadian Party leadership dispatched Harvey Murphy and Norman Freed, who brought with them "an organized group with knives," to break up the meeting. In the end, the meeting did not continue, the dissident James Blugerman convincing the two groups ready to "fight it out" that the bourgeois press would have a field day in reporting on what was shaping up to be an extremely ugly, physical confrontation. So the fractured communist ranks melted into the night, going their separate ways. Later, some of the precocious Jewish youth refused in an open meeting to placate the Party hierarchy, and were shown the door out of the CPC for their defiance. Yet Spector won few of these dissidents to Trotskyism. It is surprising that the expelled ECCI member was unable to make more out of what was clearly a major recruitment possibility for the Left Opposition in Canada.⁶³

Indeed, in a later factional impasse in the Communist League of America (Opposition) Toronto branch in 1932, William Krehm, a student and future leader of the Canadian allies of disaffected Trotskyist B.J. Field, led an assault on Spector's record as a leader of the Canadian Trotskyist movement. Scurrilous and personalized, this one-sided repudiation of Spector harkened back to the disaffected Jewish branch of the YCL. According to Krehm and his supporters, in the interval between Spector's return from the Sixth Congress and his exit from the Canadian Party, one of North America's leading Left Oppositionists did little to develop an admittedly incoherent oppositional current within the Canadian communist movement and, indeed, aligned with Stalinist bureaucrats such as Sam Carr to expel the hard-to-handle Jewish youth. The dissident Jewish component of the Canadian communist youth section was ostensibly fixated on "a question of Party regime."

⁶¹O'Brien, "Spector and the Origins of Canadian Trotskyism," quoting M.L. Pelt, "The Communist Party of Canada, 1929-1942," MA thesis, University of Toronto, 1964, 16.

⁶²For lists of some of those expelled see Davis, *Wretched of the Earth and Me*, 127.

⁶³Quarter interview.

Barely touched upon in writings on Canadian communism, it is nevertheless likely that the Jewish communist youth articulating discontent in 1928-1929 were a mixed lot: expelled from the Party, some were subsequently readmitted, while others formed the substantive core of a contingent of nascent Trotskyists, led by a figure named Roth, who soon gravitated to Krehm. The latter found much to chastise in Spector's behaviour and, along with his co-factionalists, was merciless, and brutally overstated, in pillorying the founding figure in the Canadian Left Opposition. Spector, it was claimed, was entirely responsible for the disoriented state of Canadian Trotskyism: "We have then before us the edifying spectacle of the future leader of the L.O. returning from Moscow in possession of Trotsky's writings on the question of bureaucracy who takes part in the suppression of a rank and file revolt against the Stalinist bureaucrats!" The expelled Jewish branch of the YCL later supposedly approached Spector and joined with him, but the initiative was theirs not Spector's. The situation did not improve with time, and Krehm and Company lambasted Spector's pursuit of a law career at the expense of contributing to the building of a revolutionary organization: "the whole activity of the Toronto branch was subordinated to the exigencies of Spector's legal studies. Group meetings were postponed or not called at all in order to accommodate [him] ... there was really no organized group." Spector, in this exaggerated repudiation, was not so much the builder of Canadian Trotskyism, as a subjective force holding it back.⁶⁴

Police reports on the nascent Trotskyist movement in Canada present a parallel statement, and convey a picture of a Left Opposition that was hardly threatening to either the bourgeois state or its Stalinist rivals. Those who aligned with the expelled Spector were almost entirely Jews, some of whom undoubtedly spoke little English, and as late as 1932 Spector and "what Trotsky faction there is in Canada" were judged relatively inconsequential. Little presence existed outside of Toronto, and

⁶⁴ Above paragraphs draw on undated [June-July 1932?], untitled Majority Grouping of the Toronto Branch responding to the statement of the National Committee of the Communist League of America (Opposition) on the Toronto Branch, signed by William Krehm and All Members of the Majority, in possession of the author, and also in Ross Dowson Papers, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa [hereafter cited as Krehm Statement on NC/Toronto Branch]. My thanks to Ian Angus for providing me with a copy of this document. I interviewed Krehm in Toronto on 25 May 2005. He preferred to speak without being tape-recorded. On matters of programmatic detail and the nature of the disputes within the Trotskyist movement in Toronto in this period, his memory was vague. He insisted that while he was in the youth movement of the Trotskyist Toronto milieu, and had been recruited by Albert Glotzer in Chicago, he was never a member of the Communist League of America (Opposition), but was always associated with B.J. Field. Krehm also maintained in 2005 that there were no serious disputes of political program in 1931-1932, and that the central issue was two-sided. Krehm, Roth, and those around them were youthful, energetic, and in Krehm's word, 'competent', which meant that they were able to get things done and wanted to be doing things. Yet they were also, in his words, 'snotty-nosed kids', and he could see, in retrospect, how they might have rubbed Spector the wrong way.

in Montreal, again, “the Trotsky supporters ... [were] Russian Jews for the most part.” Agents of the state judged a February 1932 report in *Der Kampf* that referred to the “1 1/4 Trotskyists in Montreal” as “naturally an under-estimation,” but they spent little time worrying about Spector and his comrades, whose numbers were few, and who lacked an “organized group and regular meetings.” They seemed of little concern to the much larger and seemingly more threatening Communist Party of Canada.⁶⁵ Some of Spector’s initial supporters, including the father of prominent Left Oppositionist Maurice Quarter, found it next to impossible to face the isolating Stalinist antagonism on a day-to-day basis. Being part of a Trotskyist current that swam against the stream was not something they were apparently cut out for, and they found a way back to the Communist Party, their political spirit broken but their sociability networks reestablished. Thus James Blugerman, expelled with Spector in 1929, chaired an early Toronto meeting in which the views of the Left Opposition were aired. Five years later, when Spector addressed a United Front assembly of dissidents in the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation’s Labour Section, Blugerman no longer shared a Trotskyist podium. Instead, he was in the crowd, heckling Spector’s attacks on Stalinist betrayals. “You stand alone,” shouted his former ally, to which Spector replied, “Yes, that is why I am a Trotskyite. Lenin stood alone.”⁶⁶

To be sure, there were some bright spots in the early history of Canadian Trotskyism, not the least being Jack MacDonald’s joining the movement of Left Opposition after his expulsion from the Communist Party, a complicated affair that unfolded throughout late 1930-early 1931. Other significant cadre included Maurice Quarter and Joe Silver, and these and others helped Trotskyism establish itself in Toronto’s needle trades unions. MacDonald and Spector, however, had a history of personal clashes within the communist movement of the 1920s, and while MacDonald was hardly the worst of Spector’s antagonists in 1928, he had assumed his own kind of role in drumming Canada’s first Trotskyist out of the Party Spector had helped to build. If MacDonald, a mass leader with years of experience as a trade union cadre and agitational speaker, did not gravitate to the shrill anti-Trotskyism of Stewart Smith in the rough musicking of Spector in 1929, it may well have simply confirmed Spector in his judgements of MacDonald as program-

⁶⁵CSIS, H.Q. Ref. 177/542, “Re The Militant: Communists Expelled from the Communist Party,” Niagara Falls/Toronto, 22 February 1929; H.Q. Ref. 177/392, ‘C’ Division, Re *Der Kampf*, Montreal, 26 March 1932.

⁶⁶Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 216, notes that in total approximately 30 individuals in the Canadian Party and its youth section were expelled in 1928-1929, but that only a dozen stood the difficult ground of staying with the struggle to build a Trotskyist Opposition. On Blugerman’s about-face see CSIS, ‘O’ Division, H.Q. Ref. 175/4457, “Report,” Toronto, 14 February 1929; H.Q. Ref. 175/P 1712, Maurice Spector/Radical Activities, Toronto (General), Cross Reference Sheet, 30 May 1934. The police agent quoted Spector as using the word ‘Trotskyite’, but the probable reference would have been to ‘Trotskyist’.

matically underdeveloped. That Spector and MacDonald were the mainstay of Canadian Trotskyism in the mid-1930s and the chief contributors to the movement's publication, *The Vanguard* (1932-1937), was an indication that the Left Opposition's house north of the 49th parallel rested on a precarious foundation. Moreover, MacDonald's capacity to contribute to Canadian Trotskyism in the 1930s was limited by health problems, and while he would end his days a confirmed Marxist, his premature death in 1941 was preceded by five years of relative political inactivity.⁶⁷

Spector, Cannon, and Trotskyism's 'Dog Days'

It is difficult not to see the tragedy of Canadian Trotskyism's inability to secure itself a footing in the Canada of the 1930s as very much bound up with "the subjective factor" that Spector placed an accent on in some of his 1920s journalism.⁶⁸ For in Spector himself lay the strengths and weaknesses of Canada's Left Opposition.

On the positive side was the programmatic clarity, incisive critical recognition of Stalinism's failings, and acute intellectual and theoretical grasp of the historic tasks of the revolutionary left. Spector, not only more than other Canadian communists, but almost alone among them, appreciated the absolute necessity of challenging the defeatist Stalinist turn from a program of world revolution and the suffocating embrace of "socialism in one country," with its attendant atmosphere of stifling Comintern bureaucratization and, ultimately, its reliance on physical intimidation, terror, and the liquidation of the entire corps of original Bolshevik cadre. He brought to the Canadian revolutionary ranks a dialectical grasp of national peculiarity in the age of imperialist decay, and his 1920s contributions to discussions of 'the Canada Question' and 'independence' were framed within a forceful analysis of the determinations of US and British capital, albeit in ways that, especially in the 1925-1927 years, were skewed by the general Comintern/Stalinist errors of the period, accenting the progressive potential of nationalism in the struggle for communism.⁶⁹ This internationalist sensibility and concern was perhaps a touchstone

⁶⁷ On MacDonald, his expulsion and movement to Trotskyism, see Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 307-313, 369-373; Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 158; "Jack MacDonald Joins the Left Opposition," *The Militant*, 28 May 1932; CSIS, H.Q. Ref. 175/P 1712, Secret Report of J.H. MacRien, Commissioner, "Maurice Spector," 29 October 1934; [Communist Party of Canada], *Resolutions of Enlarged Plenum, February 1931* (Toronto 1931). The Quarter interview accents the important, if different, roles of Spector and MacDonald, noting how difficult it was for both of these men to weather the isolation, the material constraints, and the generalized demoralization of the working-class movement in the early 1930s.

⁶⁸ Maurice Spector, "Delegate to Comintern Reports to Convention. Maurice Spector Sums Up Work of Fourth Congress," *The Worker*, 15 March 1923.

⁶⁹ Spector's writing on the national question is open to considerable criticism, aligned as it was in the mid-1920s with Zinoviev's Comintern embrace of 'nationalist' possibilities for

of his *refusal*, as early as 1925, to abide by directives from an officialdom that betrayed little of the honesty of expression and openness to debate, exchange, and revolutionary guidance that had characterized the early relations of the Comintern and its attitude toward affiliated national sections.

But in scrutinizing Spector critically, it is also apparent that he had some deficiencies, and these were exacerbated by the period in which he came to lead a small movement of Opposition. For a figure such as Spector, the 'grey' of theory needed the 'green' of practice, the grounding of mass struggles and movements that were both rare in Canada in the 1929-1935 years and, when they did appear, were too often overtaken on the left by the larger Stalinist forces of the Communist Party of Canada, now very much in the hands of Tim Buck and Stewart Smith, directed by the Third Period's lurch to the left. Precisely because Spector was a principled Left Oppositionist, he stood the difficult ground of defending Buck and the Stalinists

the revolutionary left, but this awaits a serious scrutiny. For a critique of the Canadian Party's adaptation to Comintern views on nationalism, resulting in views put forward by Tim Buck that Canadian independence under capitalism was a necessary step toward socialism, see Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 166-173. An inadequate discussion appears in Gary O'Brien, "Maurice Spector, Pioneer Canadian Socialist, on the national question," *Forward*, November 1974, which needs comparison with O'Brien, "Spector and the Origins of Canadian Trotskyism," 39-58. A rejoinder to the brief *Forward* statement appears in Arnold Michaels [Arnie Mintz], "Maurice Spector, the Early Communists, and Canadian Nationalism," *Spartacist Canada*, January 1977. For representative Spector writings see "The Retreat of British Imperialism," *The Worker*, 1 April 1922; "United Front and the Canadian Labor Party," *The Worker*, 18 April 1923; "The Failure of the Imperial Conference: The Twilight of British Imperialism," *The Worker*, 22 December 1923; "Black-and-Tan Methods Rule. Sarajevo Note of 1914 and Mussolini at Corfu Outdone by British Junkers Lusting for Sudan Cotton Resources," *The Worker*, 6 December 1924; "Canadian Workers Must Destroy the BNA Act ... Means of Keeping the Workers in Tutelage to British Imperialism," *The Worker*, 14 February 1925; "The Anglo-American Rubber Conflict," *The Worker*, 29 August 1925; "Canada and the British," *The Worker*, 21 March 1925; "Canada and British Wars," *The Worker*, 19 December 1925. In a later two-part essay, "Canada, the Empire, and War Danger," *Canadian Labor Monthly*, January and February 1928, Spector put forward views on class struggle and the indigenous Canadian ruling class that were more congruent with his later development as a Trotskyist. With Spector's expulsion from the Communist Party, he was miscast as being the theoretical architect of a revolutionary role for the oppressed Canadian colonial bourgeoisie, elevating unduly the struggle for Canadian independence, and remaining "silent upon the question of proletarian revolution." Whatever criticisms can be made of Spector on the national question, the subsequent Stalinist critique was little more than caricature, and it directed attack away from Tim Buck, whose published writings in the mid-1920s were far more blatant in their representation of the 'progressive' character of the Canadian bourgeoisie. Moreover, whatever Spector wrote in this period merely reproduced the direction of wrong-headed Comintern policy. See J. Porter, "The Struggle Against the Right Danger in the CP of Canada," *The Communist International* (15 October 1929), 946. Note, as well, Smith, *Comrades and Komsomolks*, 104-105.

from unfolding state repression at the same time as he struggled to expose the right leaning essence of a Party that seemed, superficially, to be advocating class struggle positions. This led, during the 1931 arrest and trial of Buck and other communists under Section 98 of the Criminal Code, to Spector approaching Buck, enthused by the prospects of doing something to "save the Party that we founded." Buck, who had always taken a back seat to the ugliest of Trotskyist baiters in the communist movement, Stewart Smith, invited Spector to his home to participate in what was a united front endeavour of the revolutionary left to resist state repression. But this only underscored Spector's isolation. The Stalinist forces, composed at the base of honest, if misled, militants, were far more deeply rooted in the trade unions and general political dissent of the period than were Spector and the handful of Canadian Trotskyists, and they were as well beneficiaries of the authoritative backing of the Soviet Union. Their hands were not tied with the principles of a difficult project of simultaneous defence/critique, and in general they vilified Trotskyists as the worst of a motley crew of 'social fascists', masked agents of capital who threatened the Revolution.⁷⁰ As Maurice Quarter recalled, "the reaction that was setting in inside the working class mov't, the various defeats, the victory of stalinism, it was very difficult ... the L.O. always wanted a united front ... but it was the communist party who would have no part of it.... our ideas were right. [W]hy they weren't being accepted, see, that's the most difficult thing, when you know you are right, you've got the answer, but people can't see it."⁷¹

As an intellectual, and especially as one who spent almost the entirety of his life as a professional revolutionary in the upper reaches of 'party' life and the international communist movement, Spector was isolated from too much, and it registered in his political and organizational work. One of Cannon's critical strengths was his capacity to forge links between intellectuals such as Spector and skilled organizers and potential mass leaders. While he undoubtedly leaned in the direction of the working-class agitator, which was, after all, most emphatically his background, he was also the 'party builder' and had something of the autodidact and intellectual in him as well, at least enough to know the value of this when he saw others whose capacities in such realms surpassed his own. This was precisely what made Cannon such a powerful presence in both the United States communist milieu of the 1920s and in his later history as North America's preeminent Trotskyist figure. Cannon combined organizational, party-building skills with recognition that

⁷⁰Buck, *Yours in the Struggle*, 182-183, recounts the Spector-Buck conversation and meeting. In general see Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, but note a series of Spector-authored articles in *The Militant* defending the Communist Party of Canada from the 1931 attacks of the state: "Anti-Communist Arrests in Canada," 21 August 1931; "The 1931 Communist Party Trial," 14 November 1931; "The Canadian Party Trial," 21 November 1931; "The Defendants Before the Docks in Canada," 5 December 1931.

⁷¹Quarter interview. For a comment on how young communists ostracized early Trotskyists and failed to appreciate their message see Davis, *Wretched of the Earth and Me*, 127-128.

any proletarian body that was to amount to anything needed the cosmopolitan reach and theoretical sophistication of those, like Spector and his American counterpart Max Shachtman,⁷² who had so much to offer analytically. If the jostling of these quite different communist 'personality types' in a working-class party inevitably produced frictions, they could be smoothed out and *combined productively*, if only the larger vision of sustaining the Party and its purpose could be kept in mind.⁷³ To be sure, in the hot-house atmosphere of the constrained small-group politics that was the determined lot of all Trotskyists in the late 1920s and early 1930s, factionalism was quite pronounced and often took a personalist turn. Cannon was able to ride this out in the Communist League of America (Opposition), and he staved off a premature split with Shachtman to weather the "dog days" of the movement and keep enough of an organization and a diversity of talents alive to come out of the other end of this debilitating period able to influence a significant event in the labour history of the United States, the 1934 Minneapolis General Strike.⁷⁴

Spector was unable to duplicate such accomplishments in Canada, although there were some hints that in 1934 the Trotskyist movement was, finally, gaining some important ground.⁷⁵ But there is little to indicate that Trotskyism in Canada was an authoritative presence on the left. There were no doubt reasons for this in the objective, structural determinations of political economy, which certainly limited what could be done. Decisions taken in the international movement, in which little attention was paid to the weak forces of Canadian Trotskyism, often exacerbated the problem. But Spector himself, for all of his significance, accomplishment, and ability, also played a role. He was, by almost all accounts, a very different personality than Cannon, who had his own foibles, of course, but who functioned, nevertheless, as a leader committed to the primacy of political program, a figure on the left

⁷² Among a number of treatments of writings of Shachtman see, for instance, Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*; Max Shachtman *et al.*, *The Fate of the Revolution: Lost Texts in Critical Marxism, Volume I* (London 1998).

⁷³ Note James and Grace Lee Boggs & Freddy and Lyman Paine, *Conversations in Maine: Exploring Our Nation's Future* (Boston 1978), 281-282.

⁷⁴ See, as introductions only, *Dog Days*; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*.

⁷⁵ See Ross Dowson, "A Contribution to the Discussion," in *Revolutionary Trotskyist Bulletin No. 3: Trotskyism and the CCF/NDP: Documents from 1938 to 1973* (Toronto 1978), 9; *The Militant*, 8 December 1934. By 1934 the Canadian Trotskyists had finally expanded beyond Toronto, making contacts in Winnipeg, Vancouver, and Montreal; their own newspapers, the English-language *Vanguard* and a Ukrainian-language publication, *Robitnychi Visty*, were appearing; unemployed work was underway; trade union activity, especially among Jewish needle trades workers, was progressing; and distinct organizational structures, separate from those of the United States movement, the Workers Party of Canada and the Spartacus Youth League, had been established.



Max Shachtman and James P. Cannon, detained by US military, Minneapolis General Strike, 1934, Minnesota Historical Society.

able to translate this into organizational achievements. Spector's strengths did not lean in this direction.⁷⁶

Spector and the Subjective Factor: The Problem of Cliques

For there was about Maurice Spector something of the glib cliquist, most comfortable in the highly personalized close quarters of male admiration and sociability. Earl Birney observed this first-hand in his limited, but adroitly perceived, contact with the Trotskyist movement in the 1930s. His fictional account, *Down the Long Table*, looked back on Spector from the mid-1950s, to remember a "protean and inimitable leader," perched atop the small forces of incipient Trotskyism, a man given to 'knowing airs' and needful of dialogue "willingly surrendered to him." Birney's rendition of a Spectoresque slighting of the companion of a former Stalinist comrade conveys something of the language in which Spector conducted the after-dinner education of young socialists: "Dark and lanky, in a shock-trooper's outfit? ... She's of no political consequence. A young *epigone* who equates proletarianism with dirty fingernails ... an unconscious lesbian being a conscious nymphomaniac."⁷⁷ This fictional portrait rings true when placed alongside the gossip tone and 'clever' discourse of correspondence that Spector conducted with Shachtman, Martin Abern, and others in the United States movement in the 1930s. Writing to Shachtman in October 1929, Spector commented on the demise of the Canadian communists' women's work: "Since the death of Florence Custance, the Women's work is at a standstill. This is putting it mildly. Beckie Buhay is unfitted for this kind of work (I have no authoritative data on the glandular or uterine aspects) and nobody else appears available." He closed with a highly personalized reference to European developments: "Have you heard from Paz? That was a very abrupt demise of his group. I suppose we are in no position to judge what led up to

⁷⁶ Although hardly a disinterested source, Bryan Palmer interview with William Krehm, 25 May 2005, provides a credible portrait. Spector, in Krehm's view, was a man of great stature on the revolutionary left. Talented as a thinker and a speaker, Spector was nevertheless not particularly effective at integrating enthusiastic youthful recruits into the Trotskyist movement. Somewhat vain, aloof, and distant from comrades, he presented a contrast to Jack MacDonald. Rather prone to ride on his ECCI laurels, and given to understandings of what he was owed as a personage of importance on the left, Spector was somewhat less than effective in organizing and mobilizing the revolutionary ranks. This seems to be confirmed in Spector's rather precipitous dismissal of Krehm. Note Spector's comments on Krehm to Shachtman: "Fifteen years of political activity give one something of a moral and revolutionary advantage over a Krehm ..." Spector to Shachtman, 7 May 1932, MSP. Or, slightly more than six months later: "there is no Krehm group ... little clique of pseudopoliticians ... no standing, have not done a stroke of work, ... have vilified us ... should have been suspended or expelled from the organization ..." Spector to Shachtman, 29 December 1932, quoted in *Dog Days*, 369.

⁷⁷ Earl Birney, *Down the Long Table* (Toronto 1975), 109-111, 127-128.



Maurice Spector, 1930s, from Ross Dowson.

the so sharp relations between Paz and LD until we get some 'inside stuff' except, of course, that Paz proved intransigent in his claims to be recognized as the 'Alleinselige' of the Opposition. Rosmer is making a good job of the Verite. It would not come amiss to give me any news there is on our own Inner-Lage."⁷⁸

Too much should not be made of such inner sanctum correspondence, which, in its congealing of gendered complacencies, smug sarcasm, one-sided certainties,

⁷⁸ Maurice Spector to Max Shachtman, 14 August 1929, Toronto, Reel 3353, MSP. On Custance and *The Woman Worker* see Margaret Hobbs and Joan Sangster, eds., *The Woman Worker, 1926-1929* (St. John's 1999). Maurice Paz was a French lawyer who was expelled from the Communist Party, joined the Left Opposition and befriended Trotsky, whom he supported with financial loans. An editor of *Contra Le Courant* until 1929, when he broke from Trotsky, Paz later joined the Socialist Party and abandoned revolutionary politics for a more reformist, parliamentary orientation. See Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929-1940* (New York 1963), 7, 27, 48-50.

and insider gossip, had the whiff of a young men's college debating society about it. But it is appropriate to note that it differed in character from the rough-but-much-more-straightforward language of communication evident in group alignments associated with Cannon from the Workers Party of the 1920s into the Communist League of America (Opposition) in the early 1930s.⁷⁹ The problem with Spector's type of discourse, and the relations that it reflected, surfaced when it crossed over into a factionalism driven by personal animus that overshadowed a principled commitment to revolutionary program. This is precisely what happened in the United States-Canadian Trotskyist milieu over the course of the 1930s. Friendships, warm personal relations, and particularities of style are not out of place in left organizations, but they are no substitute for adherence to a *political program*. This had impressed itself on Cannon even before he embraced Trotskyism, and it was the first abiding lesson he learned in the factional gang warfare of the United States communist movement in the mid-to-late 1920s. Late in 1925, en route to Moscow, Cannon wrote to Rose Karsner and others of his circle, outlining some considerations on an emerging inner-party battle. It was vital to deal with all questions, he stressed, not on the basis of caucus convenience, but "as they arise according to our main political line, regardless of who is for or against."⁸⁰ But the extent to which cliquist cleverness and 'insider trading' of privately dispatched information coloured the correspondence of Spector, Shachtman, Abern, Albert Glotzer, and others in the early-to-mid-1930s revealed a problematic politics of what Trotsky dubbed "personal combinations."⁸¹ This may have played itself out to less effect in the larger context of the United States; combinations and alignments, given the numbers involved, could shift dramatically over short periods of time and within changed circumstances. But in Canada, where recruits to the Left Opposition could be counted on the fingers and toes of the movement's leader, the personalization of factional combination, which by all accounts Spector deepened rather than lessened, could have a more debilitating impact.⁸²

⁷⁹For comment on this language see Alexander Bittelman, "The Things I Have Learned: An Autobiography," Unpublished Manuscript, Collection 62, Boxes 1-2, 407, Tamiment Institute, New York University, New York, NY.

⁸⁰James P. Cannon to Dear Comrades, 16 December 1925, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

⁸¹*Dog Days*, 218-219. This source is more generally useful, as well, as a compilation of correspondence that confirms an assessment of the kind of discourse that characterized those with whom Spector was in closest collaboration in the Canada-United States Trotskyist milieu.

⁸²Spector had, according to Stewart Smith, often functioned in the Canadian Workers Party by brow-beating comrades. Although Smith's account is undoubtedly prejudiced, note Smith, *Comrades and Komsomolks*, 80-81, 109-110. In Canada, in 1932, the minute forces of Trotskyism were split down the middle, with Spector initiating a highly problematic procedure where the Toronto branch of the Communist League of America (Opposition) was divided in two, with Spector heading a minority section and William Krehm leading another, majority, branch. Spector was undoubtedly dealing with a difficult element in Krehm, whose

Moreover, in time, as Spector grew less and less politically active and more and more given to the programmatic eclecticism of the 'free lance', he gravitated to the most depoliticized, personalized milieu of the Canadian-United States Trotskyist movement, what Joseph Hansen designated the Abern Clique. In Martin Abern's cultivation of an administrative centre sealed in sociability and the warm, personal connections of a select group of leading cadre, whose private difficulties (which Spector always had aplenty) were acknowledged and catered to, Spector possibly found social ties and friendship connections more attractive than staunch adherence to the principles of political program. Trotsky, in 1940, dismissed Abern's "family clique" and, in an unfair language of caricature that was not uncharacteristic of the Left Opposition's ultimate voice of authority, referred to his mid-1930s "protectors ... Holy Father Muste and his altar boy Spector."⁸³ Abern's considerable strengths as an organizer and highly efficient office administrator proved invaluable in the United States communist youth movement, in the International Labor Defense organization, and in the first decade of the Left Opposition's *travails*, culminating in the founding of the Cannon-led Socialist Workers Party [SWP] in 1938. But a figure such as Abern, a "born recruiter" who was a warm human being genuinely attractive to youthful anti-Stalinist revolutionaries won to the program of Trotskyism as well as Party intellectuals whom he feted as indispensable, proved uniquely placed, if he or she came to feel embittered, slighted, and un-

politics were always mercurial; he would soon make his exit from the CLA. But it was revealing that two of the Krehm group's demands to resolve the crisis in the Toronto branch were that 1) Spector be required to join a mass organization; and 2) that Spector "substantiate his accusations against other comrades by actual facts or else withdraw them." See *Dog Days*, 297. For the Krehm Group's sustained, and quite personalized, assault on Spector see Krehm Response to the NC/Toronto Branch.

⁸³For a typical Abern communication with Spector, expressing regret at the "extremely unfortunate personal difficulties that make matters so hard for you," see Martin Abern to Maurice Spector, 5 March 1930, in John Dwyer Collection, Martin Abern Papers, Box 11, Folder 44, Wayne State Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit, MI. The point about personal cliquism and warmth and understanding toward comrades *not* necessarily being the same thing is underlined by this communication. Written only a few months after a nasty blow-up within the Communist League of America that was highlighted by a Cannon-Spector falling-out, this letter was understanding of Spector's personal needs during a time in which Abern had little empathy for Cannon, who was going through an extremely difficult personal period. Cannon was destitute, his wife, Rose Karsner, was suffering health problems related to either depression or exhaustion, and the couple were responsible for three dependent teenage children. When Cannon, who had withdrawn from his political responsibilities, asked Abern as office manager to fund the purchase of a typewriter so that he could write for *The Militant* at home (there was much complaint by Abern and Shachtman about Cannon's shirking of journalistic responsibility), Abern refused the request bluntly. See *Dog Days*, 35-37. The Trotsky quotation is from Leon Trotsky to Albert Goldman, 5 June 1940, in Leon Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism* (New York 1973), 180.

dervalued by the leadership, to galvanize cliquist opposition based on friendships and “inside dope,” filtered to comrades selectively through the proverbial grapevine.⁸⁴ For various reasons — the inability to establish a thriving Trotskyist movement in Canada in the 1930s, constant pressures from the United States Left Opposition leadership to relocate Spector to New York, a growing resentment of Cannon and his authority, a subtle, but developing, disenchantment with the program of the historic Left Opposition — Spector aligned with Abern and, in the process, began the slow apostatic relinquishment of the revolutionary politics that he had held in such high regard for much of his life, and that he developed with passion and acute intelligence in his youth and middle years.⁸⁵

To be sure, there was much in the mid-1930s that deserves serious scrutiny, including Spector’s opposition, along with Hugo Oehler and others, to the Cannon-led entry of the Trotskyist forces into the Socialist Party, the so-called Trotskyist ‘French Turn’.⁸⁶ Unlike Oehler, however, Spector followed discipline, entering a Socialist Party whose social democratic reformism he undoubtedly deplored. When the Socialist Workers Party was formed, Spector returned to his *forte*, penning a series of journalistic articles in the pages of the party’s theoretical journal, *The New International*, on whose editorial board he sat with Shachtman and the philosopher, James Burnham. Abern, characteristically, was the publication’s business manager.⁸⁷ But no sooner had he completed this set of publications, which betrayed a hint of his movement away from Trotskyism, than Spector left the movement, which was on the verge of being torn asunder by a bitter factional dispute that saw Burnham, Shachtman, and Abern split from Cannon and, to some extent, from Trotsky.⁸⁸ He was gone from the masthead of the *New International* in April 1939, having relinquished or been relieved of his editorial board position. Expulsion from the SWP soon followed.

Thereafter Spector rejoined the very Socialist Party he had argued against entering in the mid-1930s, locating himself on its left-wing, but he resigned from that

⁸⁴In 1936 Shachtman wrote Trotsky: “Our CC has no *personal confidence* in Abern, who is so utterly factional in his dealings that he can not even be trusted with confidential material which has nothing whatever to do with a factional fight.” Quoted from “A Report on the 1936 Conference,” reprinted in Anthony Marcus, ed., *Malcolm X and the Third American Revolution: The Writings of George Breitman* (Amherst, NY, forthcoming 2005), 306-11.

⁸⁵For one side of the argument see Joseph Hansen, *The Abern Clique* (New York 1972).

⁸⁶See, for instance, Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 780-792; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, esp. 169-256.

⁸⁷See the following articles by Spector in *The New International*: “After Twenty Years,” (January 1938), 28-30; “The Record of the Democracies,” (April 1938), 115-119; “The Collapse of the New Deal,” (June 1938), 173-175; “The Soviets and Democracy,” (October 1938), 301-303; “The Popular Front’s Guilt,” (November 1938), 329-330.

⁸⁸See Leon Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism* (New York 1973); James P. Cannon, *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* (New York 1972), which alludes to Spector and Abern’s cliquism in passing, 49.

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Workers of the World, Unite!

THE VANGUARD

Organ of the Workers' Party of Canada

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FIVE CENTS PER COPY

UNEMPLOYED ORGANIZE!

It is a fact that during the past four years of the heaviest unemployment in the history of the Dominion there has been no real, functioning mass organization of the unemployed in the City of Toronto. There have been sporadic demonstrations which have been easily broken up by the police. There have been delegations, which engaged the City Mayor Stewart in vigorous cross firing. But that could not cover up the undeniable fact that there was no substantial mobilization of the masses in an unemployed organization that the unemployed could feel was truly their own organization. To be blunt, the responsibility for this state of affairs lay with the crude and hectic rule-or-ruin policies of the Stalinist officials who insisted on a hundred percent mechanical, bureaucratic and autocratic domination of the unemployed. Whoever would not see absolutely eye to eye with Stalinism was duly eliminated. As a result both the "block" and "ward" organization of the unemployed under Stalinist auspices were practically a failure.

It is therefore a matter of congratulation that at last the Toronto Unemployed Union has emerged from a series of public meetings at the Labor Temple, and gives promise of becoming a real mass organization. Even the Stalinists were compelled by the evidence of the enthusiastic response of the unemployed, to soft-pedal, and to offer to co-operate.

The sincerity of this offer is yet to be tested in action. It remains to be seen whether they will loyally assist in building up the Toronto Unemployed Union, or whether they will endeavor merely to subordinate it to their so-called "ward organizations" which exist mostly on paper.

So far as the Workers' Party is concerned, we will do everything we can to assist in developing a rank-and-file organization, based on democratic control, and placing the interests of the masses first and foremost. The fact that several of our unemployed comrades have been elected on the Executive is evidence that the unemployed have confidence in the policies our comrades represent.

The T.U.U. elected as its chairman, W. Kisby, A. Latham as secretary and T. Beard as treasurer. It is proposed to organize the unemployed of the city on a basis so that

agitation will center around the five relief depots.

The statistics of an "economic recovery" should deceive no unemployed worker. Even during the favorable periods of capitalist production the developing machine technique permanently displaces labor power and lays the basis for the standing army of the unemployed. Capitalism needs this industrial reserve army and can have no interest in its abolition. Hence there can be no fundamental solution to the unemployment problem under capitalism. Nor is the present the former ordinary cycle of hard times. The previous crises were mainly caused by the rapid growth of machine production, and expansion of the national market. But more and more Canadian capitalist economy rests upon the foundation of world economy with its contradictions and crises, military and revolutionary.

Canadian Capitalism is using all its efforts to unload its economic difficulties upon the backs of the workers. It has used the crisis to reduce the standard of living of the workers. Hence it is of the utmost importance to forge a bond of unity between the employed and the unemployed. The newly formed Toronto Unemployed Union has very properly approached the trade unions and the Trades Council for moral financial assistance and placed itself on record as willing to cooperate in opposing the bosses strike-breaking and open shop activities.

Welcome the Last of the Eight!

We greet the release of Tim Buck, the last of the eight comrades sentenced to Kingston Penitentiary under Section 98 of the Criminal Code. Despite our deep political differences and the ridiculous campaign of slander carried on against us by his party associates particularly Sam Carr on his release, that we conspired with the Canadian bourgeoisie to keep the comrades incarcerated; like all all other honest workers organizations we joyfully welcome the release of the class war prisoners. The demonstration accorded Tim Buck by the Toronto workers is an indication of the growing consciousness among the masses of the class nature of the capitalist state and the spirit of growing working class solidarity.

Trotskyist Newspaper, 1934.

body in 1958. Characteristically, he personalized his departure. His old comrade Max Shachtman, moving steadily to the right since exiting the ranks of the SWP, orchestrated a merger of his Independent Socialist League with the Socialist Party. Spector had at first backed the proposal, which was also supported by Dave McReynolds, a Los Angeles-based leader of the Young People's Socialist League. But after meeting with McReynolds and Shachtman at his New York apartment, Spector suddenly realized that the deal, now on the verge of being consummated, was not going to lead in the direction that he wanted, a more open Socialist Party in which new elements, including an exodus from the Communist Party, then wracked by revelations of Stalinist atrocity and the post-1956 crisis occasioned by the invasion of Hungary, could revitalize the left-wing. Instead, after listening carefully to Shachtman for the first time, Spector grasped that the seasoned, if lapsed, Trotskyist was racing to the right, and would stop at nothing to curry favour with those antagonistic to the left so that he could capture the machinery of the Socialist Party. Spector, ever insightful, was nevertheless also persistently personalist: he told McReynolds he was leaving the SP, because he could not "go on with Max in the party."⁸⁹ Ending his days as a labour Zionist, complacent in his critique of Bolshevik doctrine, Spector died in 1968, a momentous year of revived radicalism and youth revolt. Cannon survived him into the 1970s; he went to his grave as he had lived much of his life, a revolutionary Trotskyist.

The Balance Sheet: Cannon, Spector, and the Achievement of 1928

Nothing was perhaps more difficult than embarking on the lonely task of building the Left Opposition in Canada and the United States, a courageous undertaking that Cannon and Spector committed themselves to in Moscow in the summer of 1928. Had they not been willing to put their persons directly into the subjective, and herculean, enterprise of building a communist alternative to Stalinism, the history of the revolutionary left would be truncated indeed. Moreover, if Spector and Cannon brought to this task different skills and experiences, they complemented one another productively in this fleeting, but highly significant, moment of collaboration. The tragedies of Trotskyism in Canada and the United States would be lived out in the continuities of a Stalinist stranglehold over much left-wing activity in the 1930s and 1940s, when so much was possible but far less of a lasting measure, in a revolutionary sense, achieved unambiguously. To be sure, not a little of this coming up short was rooted in the internal movement, its errors and seeming endless capacity to devour itself. But there were also objective circumstances and high barriers that even the most resolute of Left Oppositionists, armed with the analytic incisiveness of what they perceived to be Marxist truth, could not transcend. The beginning years of the Great Depression were not an auspicious moment to be creating the

⁸⁹ Maurice Isserman, *If I Had A Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York 1987), 72-73.

anti-capitalist left anew. Nevertheless, whatever the limitations of achievement, in the linked histories of two bold and committed Marxist internationalists, a small toehold was secured for Trotskyist ideas in the North American heartland of global capitalist ascendancy. From that perch the United States SWP would grow to be the strongest section of Trotsky's world organization, the Fourth International. Canada would fare less well, an unfortunate outcome that, ironically, Spector possibly contributed to at the same time as he had undoubtedly been the movement's analytic and personal stimulus. As the preeminent advocate of Trotsky's program in Canada, opposing the subordination of world revolution to the dictates of 'socialism in one country', Spector no doubt found it disappointing that the Left Opposition's organization in his adopted country seemed always secondary to 'larger' needs, an unacceptable shortchanging, in his view, that he saw as reflecting poorly on the international movement. But at the point that he articulated this criticism, Spector was already in political motion, drifting from the moorings of the Left Opposition.⁹⁰

Men and women, as Marx long ago posited, certainly make history, just as they make themselves, "but they do not [do this] just as they please."⁹¹ One part of this, as Marxists have always understood, involves objective conditions, so often under capitalism arrayed forcefully against revolutionary initiatives. Another often less appreciated dimension concerns the subjective side of historical process, a complicated conjuncture of determination comprised of individual strengths and weaknesses, in which intellectual and political sophistication is inevitably enhanced and/or undermined by the nature of the men and women involved in its translation from theory into practice. For as Marx also noted, however elegant the contribution of theoretical interpretations of the world, the ultimate point, from the standpoint of all left oppositions, "is to *change* it."⁹²

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⁹⁰Note Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 145-146.

⁹¹Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow 1968), 97.

⁹²Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," *Selected Works*, 30.