Labour
Journal of Canadian Labour Studies
Le Travail
Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes

How Can We Write Better Histories of Communism?

Bryan D. Palmer

Volume 83, printemps 2019

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1061040ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.1353/llt.2019.0008

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)
1911-4842 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce document

Palmer, B. (2019). How Can We Write Better Histories of Communism? *Labour / Le Travail*, *83*, 199–232. https://doi.org/10.1353/llt.2019.0008

Labour / Le Travail
ISSUE 83 (2019)
ISSN: 1911-4842

PRESENTATION / PRÉSENTATION

How Can We Write Better Histories of Communism?

Bryan D. Palmer

The fall 2018 issue of *Labour/Le Travail* establishes how scholarship on the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) remains a vital field of study in the history of the working class. Three of the four articles published address discrete components of CPC experience. C. Scott Eaton provides a fresh reading of the Canadian Labour Defense League's campaign (1931–36) against the repressive Section 98 of the *Criminal Code*, the Winnipeg General Strike–era criminalization of radical activities and associations used in 1931 to jail Tim Buck and seven other Communist leaders. Solidarity unionism in the Niagara Peninsula is explored in Carmela Patrias' discussion of immigrants and Communists in the decades reaching from the Great Depression to 1960. Finally, Ron Verzuh revisits a chapter in the Cold War history of Canadian trade unionism, offering a detailed look at how a 1950–52 United Steel Workers of America raid on the Communist-led Local 480 of the International Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union polarized and transformed Trail, British Columbia.[1]

All of these essays make important contributions. On their own terms they are examples of useful additions to our knowledge of histories where ethnicity, class struggle, state power, repression, and the politics of dissent intersect. In this commentary I highlight a particular interpretive issue that arises from these articles and other recent scholarship relating to how we understand

1. C. Scott Eaton, "'A Sharp Offensive in All Directions': The Canadian Labour Defense League and the Fight Against Section 98, 1931–1936," *Labour/Le Travail* 82 (Fall 2018): 41–80; Carmela Patrias, "Immigrants, Communists, and Solidarity Unionism in Niagara, c. 1930–1960," *Labour/Le Travail* 82 (Fall 2018): 119–158; Ron Verzuh, "The Raiding of Local 480: A Historic Cold War Struggle for Union Supremacy in a Small Canadian City," *Labour/Le Travail* 82 (Fall 2018): 119–158.

Bryan D. Palmer, "How Can We Write Better Histories of Communism?," *Labour/Le Travail* 83 (Spring 2019): 199–232, https://doi.org/10.1353/llt.2019.0008.

the Communist Party of Canada.[2] This necessitates engagement with the experience of Communism, including appreciation of how leaders and the rank-and-file functioned. Addressing what was entailed in the Party and its members advocating for and affiliating with the Communist International (Comintern) is obviously important and, depending on the period, this means coming to grips with the meaning of Stalinism. All of this and more demands that writing on the CPC be scrutinized with care, particular texts situated judiciously on an interpretive grid that will understandably be crisscrossed with analytic possibilities. At the current conjuncture, histories of Canadian Communism seem analytically stalled in a fruitless (if inadequately addressed) historiographic impasse, ordered by oppositions: Moscow domination vs. local autonomy; authoritarianism vs. the pursuit of social justice. We need to confront these experiences, not as dichotomies, but as related phenomena, developing our histories of Communism around more totalizing appreciations that encompass both sides of a seemingly divided logic of classification. Having myself tried to see beyond the limiting oppositions of the extant historiography, I will explore how certain historians seem unwilling to look past the conveniently counter-posed analyses of two existing schools of thought, labelled traditionalists/revisionists in the United States and essentialists/realists in the United Kingdom. As distortions of my own writing suggest, we have reached a point where it is both appropriate and necessary to be more rigorous and fair-minded in our characterization of the historiography. We will only be able to work ourselves out of the analytic cul-de-sacs associated with understanding Communism's past if we engage with both the history and the historiography in new ways. These will refuse reductionism on the analytic plane at the same time that they grapple forthrightly with Stalinism and other vexing aspects of the history of Communism.

Communist Party Historiography: International Analyses of Opposition

There has long been a tendency in the international writing on Communism to slot research into two contrasting schools of interpretation. A traditionalist historiographic camp, associated in the United States

2. There has been an explosion of important studies of Canadian Communism of late, many of them addressing ethnicity. A far-from-exhaustive list would include Stefan Epp, "A Communist in the Council Chambers: Communist Municipal Politics, Ethnicity, and the Career of William Kolisnyk," *Labour/Le Travail* 63 (Spring 2009): 79–103; Gerald Tulchinsky, *Joe Salsberg: A Life of Commitment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013); Patryk Polec, *Hurrah Revolutionaries: The Polish Canadian Communist Movement* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015); Ester Reiter, *A Future without Hate or Need* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016); Rhonda Hinther, *Perogies and Politics: Canada's Ukrainian Left, 1891–1951* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

DOI: 10.1353/llt.2019.0008

with Theodore Draper, Harvey Klehr, and John Earl Haynes[3] and in the United Kingdom with Henry Pelling and Walter Kendall,[4] argues that Moscow and the Comintern determined and dictated the policies followed by national sections of the international communist movement. At its most mechanical and most Cold Warrish, scholarship written in this vein could present Communist parties as little more than puppets "whose limbs were manipulated mechanically by strings pulled from Moscow." At its best, however, this research and writing provided a solid foundation of empirical detail on Communist activities in specific national settings, gathered together important archival material, and supplemented a rich documentary record with interviews of relevant leaders. This was, for instance, Draper's contribution, whose two volumes on the origins and development of Communism in the United States up to 1930 constitute perhaps the best early examinations of any national sections of the Comintern studied. In spite of his ultimate reduction of American Communist experience to Moscow domination, and his denial that Bolshevik leaders in the Soviet Union could have influenced Communists in the United States in productive, revolutionary ways, Draper's pioneering volumes, in the words of Jacob Zumoff, have proven "superb studies" that remain "standard works." Every serious scholar of early American Communism is in Draper's debt.[5]

3. As examples only, see, for instance, Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking, 1957); Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia: The Formative Period* (New York: Viking, 1960); Harvey Klehr, *Communist Cadre: The Social Background of the American Communist Party Elite* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1978); Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Harvey Klehr & John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself* (New York: Twayne, 1992); Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes & Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995); Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes & Kyrill M. Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998); 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. Draper's writings provide an intriguing example of historiographic evolution. As I have argued elsewhere, there was not one uniform Draper but three distinct Drapers, each of which wrote histories out of a particular period and context. See Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 8–15; Bryan D. Palmer, "What Was Great about Theodore Draper and What Was Not," *American Communist History* 8 (June 2009): 15–21.

4. Henry Pelling, *The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1958); Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900–1921* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969). An important early study that addressed Communism in Britain and that complicated Pelling's analysis was Leslie J. Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party: Its Origin and Development to 1929* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1966).

5. Perry Anderson, "Communist Party History," in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge, 1981), 150. See also E. J. Hobsbawm, "Problems of Communist History," in *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 3–11. For Jacob Zumoff's comments on Draper see Zumoff, *The Communist*

Traditionalists were eventually challenged by a group of younger, often New Left–influenced American historians, who refuse to see in the history of Communism's relationship with United States workers, African Americans, immigrants, women and others a top-down domination of Comintern directive. Opting instead to stress the agency and autonomy of a dissenting tradition that could be connected to the past and that was part of the social fabric of everyday American life, this revisionist historiography champions new approaches to Communism in the United States. Its contribution has been to widen significantly the canvas of study, painting rich landscapes of the diversity of Communism's history and peopling that terrain with sensitive accounts of men and women who committed themselves to struggle for a better, more humane, world. Generally, these new histories take their stand against the interpretive school established by Theodore Draper.

Such anti-Draper, revisionist scholarship looks at a wide range of Communist Party experience, including, but not restricted to, biographical study of major leaders and secondary cadre such as William Z. Foster and Steve Nelson.[6] Examinations of antiracist campaigns, labour defence mobilizations, radicalizing initiatives in the arts and letters sphere, and industrial organizing all contributed to what Michael Denning claimed was "the laboring of American culture in the twentieth century." In Maurice Isserman's *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party during the Second World War*, the revisionist case was given a powerful political push with examination of Earl Browder's insistence that Communism was 20th-century Americanism. Browder assimilated the history and heritage of the United States and its iconic events and personalities, like the Fourth of July and Thomas Jefferson, to the Marxist tradition, encouraging, as well, closer and more congenial relations of the US and the USSR.[7]

As the revisionist scholarship mounted, local studies were extolled as the best prism through which to view American Communist Party activity. Randi Storch saw such local research as a revelation countering the insistence of traditionalists that the record of Communism in the United States

International and US Communism, 1919–1929 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014): 3–4.

6. See, for instance, Steve Nelson, James R. Barrett & Rob Ruck, *Steve Nelson: American Radical* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981); James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Edward P. Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

7. I discuss much of this literature, as it had appeared up to 2002, in Bryan D. Palmer, "Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism," *American Communist History* 2 (December 2003): 139–174. See also Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso Books, 1996); Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party during the Second World War* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1982).

DOI: 10.1353/llt.2019.0008

was little more than a made-in-Moscow affair.[8] If this new historical writing uncovered important and previously obscured facets of Communist activity in the United States, presenting struggles for equality and justice in which the usually maligned "Reds" were extolled as proponents of all kinds of progressive causes, there has sometimes been a downside to revisionist scholarship. It often seems to avoid the politics of Communism, taking a turn toward the cultural.[9] The focus on the particularities of local experience, the capacity of Party members to function as activists on their own initiative, and attention to their social lives led Geoff Eley in 1986 to a startling conclusion: "The pull towards social history can sometimes diminish the significance of formal communist affiliation, leading in extreme cases (mainly in the literature of the CPUSA) to a history of communism with the Communism left out."[10]

In the United Kingdom, the literature is more complicated.[11] A revisionist-traditionalist divide, as Kevin Morgan has argued in *Labour/Le Travail*, was mediated by a plethora of complexities.[12] Yet there was a historiographic shifting of interpretive gears that paralleled loosely what happened in the United States. Morgan and Nina Fishman – whose late-1980s and 1990s publications accented, against Pelling, the need for research into the grassroots endeavours of ordinary Communists – pioneered new approaches to Communist history.[13] Morgan's inclinations morphed into a biographical/prospographical turn that dovetailed with a shift away from the "history from the bottom up" characteristic of the early to mid-1990s. It was largely congruent with the political/institutional approaches of Matthew Worley and Andrew Thorpe.

8. Among the local studies that might be cited are Paul Lyons, *Philadelphia Communists, 1936–1956* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Great Depression* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Randi Storch, *Red Chicago: American Communism at Its Grassroots, 1928–1935* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), the latter being the most forceful statement on the superiority of local study.

9. See, for instance, Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* (New York: Verso Books, 1987).

10. Geoff Eley, "International Communism in the Heyday of Stalin," *New Left Review* 157 (January/February 1986): 92. See also Geoff Eley, "History with the Politics Left Out – Again?" *Russian Review* 45 (1986): 385–394.

11. I comment more fully on the complexities of the British historiography in Bryan D. Palmer, "'Who ARE These Guys?!': Politics, Passions, Peculiarities, and Polemics in the Historiography of British Communism," *American Communist History* 4 (December 2005): 187–197.

12. Kevin Morgan, "The Trouble with Revisionism: Or Communist History with the History Left In," *Labour/Le Travail* 63 (Spring 2009): 131–155.

13. Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935–1941* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989); Nina Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions, 1933–1945* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995); Geoff Andrews, Nina Fishman & Kevin Morgan, eds., *Opening the Books: Essays on the Social and Cultural History of the British Communist Party* (London: Pluto, 1995).

They downplay traditionalist understandings of Comintern control of the British Communist experience, stressing instead the national circumstances that structured the course followed by advocates of the Soviet Union inside the United Kingdom, who were represented as largely determining their own fate.[14]

This historiographic stand has been resolutely opposed by John McIlroy and Alan Campbell. Their many writings on the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) raise the bar of scholarly rigour and insist on addressing Stalinism and its ramifications through intensive use of the voluminous archives of the Comintern. This significant body of documentation, not available to an earlier generation of scholars such as Pelling, was accessible to scholars in the post-USSR era of the 1990s and beyond. McIlroy and Campbell are simply not convinced, on the basis of considerable original research and sober reflection, that the CPGB exercised any meaningful *political autonomy*, stressing instead that Party tactics and the day-to-day activities of Communist militants were subject to Moscow's influence. As to ordinary, rank-and-file Communists, McIlroy and Campbell insist that identification with Russia was considerable, that many Party members committed themselves to what European historians Brigitte Studer and Berthold Unfried refer to as Stalinist society or a Stalinist way of life.[15]

14. Among many texts that could be cited, see John McIlroy, Kevin Morgan & Alan Campbell, eds., *Party People, Communist Lives: Explorations in Biography* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2001); Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen & Andrew Flinn, eds., *Agents of the Revolution: New Biographical Approaches to the History of International Communism in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005); Kevin Morgan, *Labour Legends and Russian Gold* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2006); Kevin Morgan, *The Webbs and Soviet Communism* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2006); Kevin Morgan, *Bolshevism, Syndicalism and the General Strike: The Lost Internationalist World of A.A. Purcell* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2013); Andrew Thorpe, "Comintern 'Control' of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920–1943," *English Historical Review* 113 (1998): 637–672; Andrew Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920–1943* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Matthew Worley, *Class against Class: The Communist Party in Britain between the Wars* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002); Norman Laporte, Kevin Morgan & Matthew Worley, eds., *Bolshevism, Stalinism, and the Comintern, 1919–1943: Perspectives on Stalinization* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2008).

15. John McIlory and Alan Campbell have produced a substantial body of work addressing the historiography and history of British Communism, some of which is referred to below. As representative examples of their orientation only, see John McIlroy & Alan Campbell, "'For a Revolutionary Workers' Government': Moscow, British Communism, and Revisionist Interpretations of the Third Period, 1927–1934," *European History Quarterly* 32 (October 2002): 535–569; McIlroy & Campbell, "A Peripheral Vision: Communist Historiography in Britain," *American Communist History* 4 (December 2005): 125–158. On Russian identification, Stalinism, and rank-and-file Communists, see as well Phil Cohen, *Children of the Revolution: Communist Childhood in Cold-War Britain* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997); Brigitte Studer & Berthold Unfried, "At the Beginning of History: Visions of the Comintern after the Opening of the Archives," *International Review of Social History* 42 (December 1997): 419–446; Brigitte Studer and & Berthold Unfried, "Private Matters become Public: Western European Communist Exiles and Emigrants in Stalinist Russia in the 1930s," *International Review of*

DOI: 10.1353/llt.2019.0008

Distinctions of national historiographic trajectories aside, by the mid-1980s in the United States and by 2001 to 2004 in the United Kingdom, Communist historiography fractured into opposing camps, designated traditionalist-revisionist and essentialist-realist, respectively.[16] No such historiographic controversy existed in Canada, at least not until quite recently.

Social History 48 (August 2003): 203–223.

16. On the United States, see Maurice Isserman, "Three Generations: Historians View American Communism," *Labor History* 26 (Fall 1985): 538–545; Gary Gerstle, "Mission from Moscow: American Communism in the 1930s," *Reviews in American History* 12 (December 1984): 559–566; Kenneth Walzer, "The New History of American Communism," *Reviews in American History* 11 (June 1983): 259–267; Theodore Draper, "American Communism Revisited," *New York Review of Books*, 9 May 1985, 35–43; Theodore Draper, "Popular Front Revisited," *New York Review of Books*, 30 May 1985, 38–47; Theodore Draper, "The Life of the Party," *New York Review of Books*, 13 January 1994, 47; Sean Wilentz, "Red Herrings Revisited: Theodore Draper Blows His Cool," *Voice Literary Supplement* (June 1986): 6; Haynes, "Cold War Debate"; John Earl Haynes & Harvey Klehr, "The Historiography of American Communism: An Unsettled Field," *Labour History Review* 68 (April 2003): 61–78. On the United Kingdom, see Nina Fishman, "Essentialists and Realists: Reflections on the Historiography of the CPGB," *Communist History Network Newsletter* 11 (August 2001): 7–16; Harriet Jones, "Conference Report: Is CPGB History Important?" *Labour History Review* 67 (December 2002): 347–355; Gidon Cohen & Kevin Morgan, "Stalin's Sausage Machine: British Students at the International Lenin School, 1926–1937," *Twentieth Century British History* 13 (January 2002): 327–355; John McIlroy & Alan Campbell, "Is CPGB History Important? A Reply to Harriet Jones," *Labour History Review* 68 (December 2003): 385–390, and the subsequent comment by a range of contributors, *Labour History Review* 69 (December 2004): 349–380; John McIlroy & 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; McIlroy & Campbell, "'Revolutionary Workers' Government'"; John McIlroy, Barry McLouglin, Alan Campbell & John Halsted, "Forging the Faithful: The British at the International Lenin School," *Labour History Review* 68 (April 2003): 99–128; Alan Campbell, John McIlroy, Barry McLouglin & John Halsted, "The International Lenin School: A Response to Cohen and Morgan," *Twentieth Century British History* 15 (January 2004): 51–76. Fishman's designation of the combatants in this historiographical sparring as "essentialists" and "realists" uses a terminology of self-interest that typecasts. Essentialists are presented as concerned only with Moscow domination while realists, like herself, stress that "events within British communism have to be examined in light of the real events and people who made them." Fishman, "Essentialists and Realists," 7–16. Such a reification of the real is echoed as well in Randi Storch, "'The Realities of the Situation': Revolutionary Discipline and Everyday Political Life in Chicago's Communist Party, 1928–1935," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 1 (Fall 2004): 19–44. I explore how Storch's presentation of "reality" misses a great deal in the introduction to my *James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, 1928–1938* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, forthcoming 2019). Kevin Morgan refuses the dichotomous designations that consolidated in the British debate, separating himself not only from characterizations of revisionism, but also from Fishman's "revolutionary pragmatism." See Morgan, "Trouble with Revisionism," 131–155, esp. 149.

Canadian Commentaries

To be sure, writing on Communism in Canada was not as plentiful as it was in either Britain or the United States. There was little basis for fomenting historiographic controversy, although it was always clear that a fundamental divide separated those whose sympathies lay with militant revolutionaries and those for whom a commitment to left-wing parties aligned with the Comintern was questionable at best.[17] Much of the historiography in Canada, prior to the publication of Norman Penner's *The Canadian Left* (1977) and Ian Angus' *Canadian Bolsheviks* (1981), bore the stamp of anti-Communism, albeit differentiated by politics, often liberal or social democratic.

Some of this writing, however much it was scaffolded on opposition to Communism, nonetheless managed to illuminate a great deal, even suggesting that "Red" revolutionaries advanced the cause of the working class. Irving Abella's *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour* (1973), for instance, conveyed a sense of what Communists contributed to the building of Canadian industrial unionism while arguing that their expulsion from the mainstream trade union movement was necessary.[18] Subsequent scholarship,

17. One reflection of this sensibility can be gained by contrasting the assessment of Canadian communism in two survey texts on labour history first written in the 1980s. Desmond Morton's *Working People: An Illustrated History of the Canadian Labour Movement* (Ottawa: Deneau, 1980) presents a jaundiced view of the CPC, regarding it as a creation of Moscow directives that fractured the Canadian left and the country's trade union movement. More positive is Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800–1980* (Toronto: Butterworths, 1983).

18. There is, of course, a world of difference between the account of the CPC written by the former Communist Penner, *The Left in Canada: A Critical Analysis* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1977), and that of Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montréal: Vanguard, 1981), the latter study animated as it is by a refusal to take at face value either the Stalinist social construction of Party history or the validity of Comintern policies such as the Third Period advocacy of ostensibly revolutionary dual unions. The two authors share an aversion to Stalinism, to be sure, but beyond this much separates them. The politics of interpretation aside, these studies are ordered by entirely different methodologies and research sensibilities. Penner's and Angus' accounts, moreover, must be distinguished from the more conservative, Draper-like treatment in William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: A History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1919–1929* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968); the liberal nationalist subdued anticommunism of Irving Abella's *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour: The CIO, the Communist Party of Canada, and the Canadian Labour Congress, 1935–1936* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973); or Ivan Avakumovic's narrative, *The Communist Party of Canada: A History* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1975). There is a case for generalizing about interpretive orientations, acknowledging that certain studies, in their overall approach, share enough to be judged congruent. But such classification must take some care to avoid a kind of ideological lumping together of unlike treatments based on seeming agreement around isolated and simplified issues. Paralleling Abella's study, Harvey A. Levenstein, in *Communism, Anti-Communism, and the CIO* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1981), concluded for the United States that had the Communists not been driven from the labour movement in the post–World War II period, trade unionism would have been strengthened.

DOI: 10.1353/llt.2019.0008

such as the socialist-feminist writing of Joan Sangster and Andrée Lévesque, was more prone to see the CPC positively. These studies, acknowledging the role of Moscow's influence and the ways in which Party leaders implemented Comintern directives, also attended to how women's experience and rank-and-file struggles were advanced by Communist militants.[19]

Ironically, one of the most critical statements on Canadian Communism, focusing on policies and leadership, was provided by Penner, a former CPCer who broke from the Party in 1956. His *Canadian Communism: The Stalin Years and Beyond* (1988) was structured around an assessment that "the relentless juggernaut of Stalinism continued even after it had achieved the removal or demotion of loyal leaders who were considered to be not very enthusiastic or not completely convinced."[20]

Historiographic Distortions

THE DIFFERENTIATED WEAVE of the Canadian historiography was always recognized, but it has only been in the last few years that historians sympathetic to the Communist Party of Canada have presented the historiography in crudely oppositional terms.[21] A blunt statement appeared in the preface to Stephen L. Endicott's study of the Workers' Unity League (WUL) of Canada, a book that contains much useful and original research: "The analysis presented in this book will not satisfy those who see the Third International as a one-man band conducted from Moscow; for them Workers' Unity League equals orders from Moscow." Endicott's citations naming those supposedly guilty of such dismissal reference two pages of an Irving Abella-authored Canadian Historical Association booklet, *The Canadian Labour Movement, 1902–1960*, and three pages of my synthesis of roughly 200 years of Canadian labour history, the 1983 edition of *Working-Class Experience*, hardly a

19. Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women in the Canadian Left, 1920–1950* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989); Andrée Lévesque, *Virage à gauche interdit: les communists, les socialistes, et leurs enemis au Québec, 1929–1939* (Montréal: Boreal Express, 1984); Andrée Lévesque, *Red Travellers: Jeanne Corbin and Her Comrades* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006).

20. Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism: The Stalin Years and Beyond* (Toronto: Methuen 1988): 16.

21. In the United States, commentaries on the oppositional historiography of Communism by Michael E. Brown were certainly premised on sympathies and attachments to the Communist Party, and they exhibit some similarities with the perspectives of Ian McKay, discussed below, including an aversion to addressing Stalinism, an opposition to the traditionalist fixation on Moscow domination articulated by Draper, an insistence that newer questions generated out of the social and cultural experience of Communists are more interesting than older, ideologically mounted inquiries, and a willingness to elide political tendencies on the left in what is referred to as a "formation." See Brown, Randy Martin, Frank Rosengarten & George Snedeker, eds., *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism* (New York: Monthly Review, 1993); Brown, *The Historiography of Communism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).

definitive text on Canadian communism. Caricaturing my views on the CPC, Endicott states that "Palmer joins those who think that from beginning to end the WUL was characterized by 'sectarian and irrational adventurism,' the product of 'subservience' and 'slavish adherence' to the Comintern."[22]

Similarly, in 2014 Ian McKay published a commentary on our mutual friend and colleague Gerald Tulchinsky, addressing his book on Joe Salsberg, a Toronto-based Jewish Communist.[23] McKay took up the difficult question of what it meant to be a Stalinist, what he called a "loyal Communist." But he did so polemically, arguing that in the historiography of Canadian communism – he lumped together indiscriminately the writings of William Rodney, Abella, Angus, Ivan Avakumovic, and me – membership in the Communist Party of Canada was reduced to "subservience to Moscow." Citing two pages of the 1992 edition of my *Working-Class Experience*, McKay claimed that I and others writing on Communism "take such undoubted subservience on the part of the leadership of the CPC to the foreign-policy demands of the Soviet Union to be uniformly typical both of the span of the Party's history from 1928 to 1939 and, further, to attribute to such 'transmission-belt' authoritarianism in the Party the essence of *the movement* as a whole, one submerged in sectarianism, alienated from the ranks of labour, and prone to 'revolutionary posturing' … working as one to further the interest of the Soviet Union and slavishly follow the Moscow Rules."[24]

McKay's representation of the historiography is cavalier, and, as I will detail below, it seriously misrepresents what I have said.[25] How are we to understand the relationship of the Communist International and its national sections? It is difficult to deny Moscow's influence. This political authority could, of course, be exercised positively, and this was done early in the history of the 1917-established workers' republic. But as the Soviet Union and with it the Comintern were transformed in the mid-to-late 1920s, the dialectic of influence shifted toward the negative, especially with the elaboration and codification of Stalin's commitment to "Socialism in One Country." The ultimate capacity to subordinate national sections affiliated with the Third International was becoming evident by the time of the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International in 1928. Many in the international Communist movement now recognized that the radical élan, the genuine Bolshevik commitment to

22. Stephen L. Endicott, *Raising the Workers' Flag: The Workers' Unity League of Canada, 1930–1936* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), xi, 340, referencing Palmer, *Working-Class Experience* (1983), 212–213, 217.

23. Tulchinsky, *Joe Salsberg*.

24. Ian McKay, "Joe Salsberg, Depression-Era Communism and the Limits of Moscow Rule," *Canadian Jewish Studies* 21 (2014): 131–132.

25. For my full response to McKay, see Bryan D. Palmer, "Reading Otherwise: Ian McKay's 'Fairly Straightforward' Misrepresentations of Canadian Communist Party Historiography," *Canadian Jewish Studies* 21 (2013): 9–13.

DOI: 10.1353/llt.2019.0008

revolutionary principles, and the unrelenting effort to extend the politics of class struggle globally characteristic of the immediate post-1917 years were long gone. Rather than provide guidance and develop revolutionary cadre, it was, by this late date, obvious that Soviet leaders now demanded "dull and sad parades of loyalty." The French Communist Maurice Thorez thought the Sixth Congress mood one of "uneasiness, discontent, skepticism," while the Italian Marxist Palmiro Togliatti was more alarmist in his resignation, confessing that the proceedings induced feelings of "hanging oneself."[26] The bitter fruit of this Soviet domination of national sections would be tasted most tragically in Germany; Eley noted that acknowledgement of the German Communists' subordination to Moscow "can't be said too strongly." He recognized that if Communist parties in Europe exercised autonomy and independence within the Comintern, these initiatives "were only ever fitfully realized. The Stalinist culture of the Third International was crucial to how they were stifled."[27]

A joke circulated among New York communists in the late 1920s. "Why," they asked, "is the Communist Party of the United States like the Brooklyn Bridge?" The sardonic answer: "Because it is suspended on cables," a reference to the telegrams that came from Moscow dictating not only policy, but also leadership configurations.[28] Jack Scott, whose oral biography I published in 1988, commented on the Canadian Party's about-face on war in 1939. Tim Buck delivered a speech that Scott attended near Delhi, Ontario, at a joint Hungarian Association/Communist Party event:

> [Buck] arrives on the scene and there are swarms of RCMP in and out of uniform. This was the 3rd of September. I'll never forget it. Big headlines in special editions of newspapers that came out of Toronto. "War Declared." One of the first sentences Buck spoke in the woods outside of Delhi was that, "This is our war." About a week later, it wasn't our war anymore. September 3rd it was our war, and then everything went off. Lots of ranting and raving. Talk about the anti-fascist struggle to defeat the Nazis and so on disappeared. Everything went off very quickly. It wasn't our war anymore.[29]

Of course Scott understood that in different periods the CPC behaved differently, and he was also acutely aware that in specific locales it was possible for secondary cadre such as himself to interpret Party policies in ways that best suited the particularities of regional circumstances. But he also appreciated that, ultimately, the Party leadership in Toronto exercised considerable influence, and that its orientation, by the mid-1930s, was always going to be determined in Moscow. "Working in a place like Sarnia was different than

26. Thorez, Togliatti, and others are quoted in Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 316–317.

27. Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 257.

28. Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess: The Truth about American Communism* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1940), 187.

29. Bryan D. Palmer, ed., *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers Movement, 1927–1985* (St. John's, Newfoundland: Committee on Canadian Labour History, 1988), 54.

being a Party organizer in Toronto," Scott recalled. "If you were out in London or Windsor or when I was up in the Northwest Territories or in Trail later, I could make my own decisions within what I wanted to interpret was the general line of the Party. Not in Toronto. Toronto was always the leadership's turf."[30]

There is no indication that McKay's and Endicott's representation of my understanding of the Communist experience, based on a few words drawn from a survey text that necessarily generalizes, takes any of this into account. They ignore a fairly substantial body of other writing, especially texts in which I address the US Communist experience, where my views are elaborated in more detail. Attention to these articles and a major book that addresses the origins of the American revolutionary left seems mandatory if distinguishing my views on Communist historiography is to be carried out convincingly.[31] To be sure, the bulk of my research-based scholarship on Communism has addressed the US experience, and study of Canadian Communism reveals a number of particularities and differences of relevance. But the broad strokes of historiographic representation can nonetheless be gleaned in how I have approached the interpretive issues central to both Canadian and US Communism. In my oral biography of Scott, for instance, I laid out an orientation that is not only clear, but obviously at odds with how McKay and Endicott characterize my views:

> To read Scott's remembrances of his life as a communist is to appreciate that the Party described by Draper and Company, whatever the sordid ideological direction of this history, was indeed a historical reality. There *was* a Party ruled by the bureaucratic sycophants of Stalin, a Party intent on following the kinds of orders that would shore up the caste sitting atop the degenerated Soviet workers state, a Party always willing, within its upper echelons, to accommodate the counter-revolutionary program of "socialism in one country." Equally apparent from Scott's account, however, is a Party that people joined the better to intervene in the class struggles of the twentieth century.

If I tilted in this account toward the capacity of the Stalinist leadership to prevail in determining the direction of the CPC and its ends, I also stressed the need to understand and study the other Party of "rank-and-file communists," calling for a "two-sided appreciation of the Communist experience." This approach was "attentive to Stalinism's capacity to structure thought and action in deforming ways, as well as being appreciative of the limited possibilities

30. Palmer, ed., *A Communist Life*, 49.

31. Writing that could have been addressed – and that actually provides a fuller and better basis on which to arrive at a reasonable and fair-minded assessment of where I can be located in terms of Communist historiography – includes Palmer, ed., *A Communist Life*; Palmer, "Rethinking the Historiography"; Palmer, "'Who ARE These Guys?!'"; Palmer, "American Communism in the 1920s: Striving for a Panoramic View," *American Communist History* 6 (December 2007): 139–150; Palmer, "What Was Great"; Palmer, "Maurice Spector, James P. Cannon, and the Origins of Canadian Trotskyism," *Labour/Le Travail* 56 (Fall 2005): 91–148; Palmer, *James P. Cannon*.

DOI: 10.1353/llt.2019.0008

for political activity open to people like Scott." My view was that a history of Communism in Canada was best written "by those who take international developments and the importance of leadership seriously and, in addition, are sensitive to the possibilities that a social history of communism holds." I acknowledged that this social history "has yet to be probed seriously in Canada."[32] This, then, was anything but a one-sided reduction of Communist experience to orders from Moscow. Typecasting of this position, based on a single, and quite specific, text is not only cavalier, but wrong.[33]

An Interpretive Challenge: The Mixed Messages of the Third Period

Within any attempt to write the history of Communism, distinctions between the leadership of the Communist International and its affiliated national parties – always themselves somewhat fractured by factionalism – and rank-and-file communists arise. How such differences emerge, and their significance, will of course depend on the backdrop against which any given historian choses to situate the revolutionaries they are attempting to bring to life. The aims and intentions of these leaders and led were sometimes consciously aligned and at other times somewhat at odds; these tensions could also exist simultaneously. As one complicated example of this history, scrutiny of the Third Period (1928 to 1934–35), a Comintern-declared era of "class against class" confrontation, will reveal the mixed record of Communist experience.

On the one hand, international Communist policy took an undeniable ultra-left turn, reflected in the sectarian rhetoric of these years.[34] It inevitably led, in the Communist Party's commitment to dual, supposedly "Red" unionism, to unnecessary marginalization of communist militants from their brothers and sisters in the mainstream trade union movement.[35] Attacks on other

32. Palmer, ed., introduction to *A Communist Life*, 6–7.

33. See also Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 1–20, and the useful discussion in Zumoff, *Communist International*, 1–21.

34. Ian McKay refers to "the limited autonomy of the nationalist communist parties and the intelligence (or otherwise) of the Comintern's world strategy," seeing the CPC's Third Period as exhibiting "notorious … ultra-leftism." McKay, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada's Left History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2005), 235.

35. Trade union clashes in the furrier industry, with Communists and social democrats engaged in often wild and ferociously violent street confrontations, traversed the history of the Third Period, the Popular Front, and the Cold War. See Joan Sangster, "Canada's Cold War in Fur," *left history* 13 (Fall/Winter 2008): 10–36. Ruth Frager suggests that Third Period Communist-led dual unions may well have alienated other workers in the American Federation of Labor garment trades unions, while Mercedes Steedman regards the experience of dual unionism more positively, with the Workers Unity League breaking open new possibilities for organizing the lowest-paid women workers in the needle trades. Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement, 1900–1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 32; Steedman, "The Promise: Communist Organizing in the Needle Trades – The Toronto Dressmakers' Campaign, 1927–1937," *Labour/Le Travail* 34

non-Communist socialists left a trail of embittered relations in the wake of the jettisoning of genuine, Leninist united front activities. On the other hand, there was also a Third Period commitment to class struggle and a willingness to fight to win that advanced working-class interests and established Moscow-aligned Communists as leaders of the unemployed movement, pioneers of industrial unionism, and architects of an important revolutionary aesthetic in the cultural realm.

Much of this, of course, dissipated in the cross-class "unity" politics of the Popular Front. Even in this changed context, however, it was difficult to get past the sectarianism of earlier years, when the epithet "social fascist" was hurled at the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, non-Communist trade union leaders, and many others with abandon.[36] And both the Third Period and the Popular Front (1934–35 to 1939), as different as they were, must be appreciated not just as products of local circumstances, but also as oscillations in programmatic Comintern direction, arrived at opportunistically and ordered by the politics of "Socialism in One Country."

All of this should be evident in a careful reading of my writing on Communism. Against the plucking of isolated words from *Working-Class Experience*, which are then lined up to present a one-dimensional misrepresentation, I will present the actual paragraphs from which McKay constructs his caricature. These address the Third Period, and briefly link it to later developments, but they establish clearly that there is more to the history of the CPC than its "line changes" and leadership, both in terms of the origins of the movement in the early to mid-1920s and with respect to the struggles and militancy of rank-and-filers:

> Prior to 1928, the party had been engaged in "mass propaganda, maintaining and broadening the party contact with the masses, preparing and training the reserves of the working class and educating party cadres." But between 1928 and 1935, the Communist leadership stressed that the radicalization of the masses was now a fact of social and political life and that the task before workers was to foment revolution. "Little do [people] realize," said Stewart Smith, an early Buck ally and graduate of Moscow's Lenin School, "that in a very short time the streets in Toronto will be running with blood." Communist strategy thus centred on the creation of dual unions (affiliated with the Workers' Unity League), the

(Fall 1994): 37–74.

36. The relationship of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and the Communist Party is complex and is judiciously outlined in James Naylor, *The Fate of Labour Socialism: The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and the Dream of a Working-Class Future* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), where the CPC's Third Period sectarianism is criticized (pp. 175–179) and a Popular Front "unity" orientation discussed. With the shift to the Popular Front, some coming together of CCF-CPC elements did occur, but potential "unity" was also regarded skeptically and resisted by some social democrats (pp. 236–252). Unity was perhaps most evident in Saskatchewan. See, aside from Naylor's discussion, the treatment of Regina in J. William Brennan, "'The Common People Have Spoken with a Mighty Voice': Regina's Labour City Councils, 1936–1939," *Labour/Le Travail* 71 (Spring 2013): 49–86.

DOI: 10.1353/llt.2019.0008

conquest of the streets, and a divisive assault on social democracy and reformism within the workers' movement.

In this period of revolutionary posturing, much was lost on the political and cultural fronts, as well as in the industrial realm. These were years that set the stage for the irrational, for the blind faith in the "party line," however far removed from Canadian reality it may have been. The late twenties and early thirties served as an introduction to the drastic shifts in Communist policy resulting from the wartime needs of the Soviet Union in 1939–1941. *As such these years have presented historians with ample ammunition to disparage and discredit the entire Communist experience, to denigrate the accomplishments of rank-and-file Communists, and to erase the achievements of militancy, struggle, and resistance – often paced by Communist effort – from the pages of Canadian history.*[37]

McKay's misrepresentation is exposed in the full quoting of passages like this, where I have italicized a critical section that he ignores completely in what he refers to as an "essential 'traditionalist' narrative," one given over to a fixation on Moscow Rule that reduces Canadian Communism to a "'transmission-belt' authoritarianism."[38] The concluding sentence in the passage quoted above, as any fair-minded reader will acknowledge, separates my approach from traditionalist-oriented historians whose assessment of Communist experience develops the very position that McKay attributes to me.[39]

To counter Endicott's view that I have represented the Workers' Unity League as nothing more than "orders from Moscow," it is only necessary, once again, to reproduce a paragraph from the text he cites. This passage is anything but a categorical repudiation of the WUL. Rather, it outlines accomplishment *and* the extent to which this body was conditioned by changing Canadian developments as well as being subject to rulings arrived at in Moscow:

37. Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800–1991* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 228–229; emphasis added.

38. McKay, "Joe Salsberg," 131–132. It needs to be pointed out, lest McKay's use of quotation marks in "'transmission-belt' authoritarianism" confuse readers into thinking that he is citing words used by other commentators, that no historian, to the best of my knowledge, has ever used such a description of Party-member relations in the Communist movement, except McKay himself. He wrote in *Rebels, Reds, Radicals* that, "politically, a leftism that imagines that every member of the movement has the intelligence to respond critically and creatively to his or her environment is to be preferred to one that converts its members into 'transmission belts' conveying messages from the central committee to the marginal members" (pp. 129–130). In this instance, McKay's metaphor is directed at left-wing organizations rather than the historians who address them. His statement seems to suggest a critique of vanguardism, be it Leninist or Stalinist, although it is difficult to know exactly what McKay is saying since, like much of the discussion in *Rebels, Reds, Radicals*, abstract assertions carry an argument too little grounded in direct reference to evidence and example. More than a decade later, however, McKay's metaphor has been transferred to historians, such as myself, who are accused of interpreting the relations of leaders-members in the Communist movement in ways that he designates "'transmission-belt' authoritarianism."

39. McKay, "Joe Salsberg," 131–132.

The WUL provided much of the strike-leadership of the early 1930s, substantiating communist claims that they led 75 to 90 percent of the strikes in the years 1932–1934. Among the Canadian workers encouraged to strike action under the banners of WUL-unions in the years 1931–1935 were Montreal garment workers, sawmill workers in New Westminster, British Columbia, lumber workers in Northern Ontario, fishermen on the Skeena and Nass Rivers of British Columbia, longshoremen in Vancouver, textile and furniture workers in Toronto, Kitchener, and Waterloo, chicken pluckers in Stratford, and miners in Noranda-Rouyn. Quebec furniture workers, teamsters, and shoeworkers across western Ontario, and, most importantly, automobile, steel, and rubber workers in central Canada, were also organized by the WUL, which was active in Windsor, London, Hamilton, Toronto, Montreal, and Sydney. At the very moment that the WUL appeared to be on the threshold of an organizational breakthrough in the mass-production sector, however, new imperatives came from Moscow. In conjunction with indigenous North American developments discussed below, these altered Canadian communists' practices in the labour movement. The rise of fascism, according to Stalin's spokesman, Dimitroff, necessitated a "United Front," and demanded the disbanding of all dual unions. The WUL was to liquidate itself, transferring its members back to the appropriate unions associated with the TLC. J.B. McLachlan, among others, refused to chart such a course, and resigned from the Communist Party; he died later in the decade.[40]

How can quotes like these square with the characterizations of Endicott and McKay? And were we to extend the discussion into my more recent, co-authored account of the role of Communists in the resistance mounted by Toronto's unemployed in the 1930s, the case would be made even more strongly.[41]

Stalinism I: A Historiographic Muddle

PRECISELY BECAUSE THE Communist Party was of such importance in Canada and the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, occupying a pivotal place among radical organizations, it is imperative that we treat it seriously and engage with its promise and potential, so evident in the period from 1917 to 1925, as well as its mistakes and ongoing mobilizing capacity. The errors made by Communists (and there were blunders aplenty, it must be said) owed much to the Stalinization of the international movement, a process that reverberated within national sections, like the CPC, decisively and undeniably after 1928.

40. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience* (1983), 212–213. The last sentence of the quoted passage, relating to McLachlan, is perhaps overly simplified, and I would probably write it differently today. Upon resignation from the CPC he had joined in 1922, McLachlan, a well-known militant leader of the Nova Scotia miners, wrote to Tim Buck: "As I look back over the years, it appears to me now that I was always more or less of a misfit in the party. I was always under a kind of humiliating supervision." David Frank, *J.B. McLachlan: A Biography – The Story of the Legendary Labour Leader and the Cape Breton Coal Miners* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1999), 520.

41. Bryan D. Palmer & Gaétan Héroux, *Toronto's Poor: A Rebellious History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016), 87–244. The CPC's role in leading unemployed struggles in the 1930s was of course dealt with briefly in both the 1983 and 1992 editions of Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*.

DOI: 10.1353/llt.2019.0008

Why militant fighters for social justice remained loyal to their Communist leadership – local, national, and international – is a central question to pursue if we are to take human agency seriously. For we cannot deny that the Soviet Union and its leadership under Stalin commanded the regard and loyalty of many within the ranks of the world's Communist parties.[42] At the same time, Stalin and the global power that he led pursued strategic programmatic shifts that weakened the capacities of revolutionaries to advance working-class interests internationally. Much was done in the Soviet Union that, retrospectively, we now appreciate contributed to undermining socialist credibility.

Even allowing for the extent to which a lot of what happened in the Soviet Union and around the world in the name of the Comintern was unknown or sufficiently obscured in distant places like Canada, enough information was available to raise questions about obeisance to Stalin and acceptance of what he was doing. Claims of innocence and ignorance are not likely to be sufficient to fully explain why Communists acted as they did.[43] Some rank-and-file advocates of the Soviet Union, for instance, engaged in physical violence against their political opponents on the left. This thuggery was undoubtedly more pronounced in the United States than it was in Canada, but in 1933 a young member of the Trotskyist Communist League of America, William Krehm, was physically assaulted when he spoke from the floor at a Montréal public forum. This kind of intimidation was reinforced by the manhandling and ejection of Left Opposition delegates from an anti-Fascist conference, as well as the use of CPC picket lines to shut down halls where dissident communists were attempting to make their critical voices heard. "Political bankruptcy breeds inevitably the methods of hooliganism," concluded a Canadian report to the New York-based Trotskyist publication *The Militant*.[44]

Approaching the CPC, then, demands a complicated appreciation of the two-sidedness of the Communist experience, in which Stalinism figures forcefully. Militants aligned with Moscow could fight the bosses in their "class against class" war, but they could also strike blows against other working-class and

42. For a discussion of how Soviet culture mattered to activists in the Communist Party of Great Britain, see Stuart Macintyre, *Little Moscows: Communism and Working-Class Militancy in Inter-war Britain* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), 184–187.

43. "American men and women who stood up courageously to the status quo … were unable to think critically about Stalinism. Talented and dedicated leaders … deluded themselves that the Party was building a more equitable America even as Stalinist crimes became impossible to justify." Will Cooley, "Communism, the Cold War, and a Company Town: The Rise and Fall of UE Local 179," *Labor History* 55 (2014): 86, quoted in Verzuh, "The Raiding of Local 480," 116.

44. The use of gangster tactics to suppress dissenting communists within the revolutionary movement was a tactic imported into the socialist movement (repeating offensive practices employed by a reactionary trade union bureaucracy against its left-wing critics) by Stalinists, especially in attacks on Trotskyists in the years from 1929 to 1934. I detail this extensive hooliganism and thuggery for the case of the United States in my forthcoming *James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism.* See also "Montreal Stalinists Answer Marxian Ideas with Hooliganism," *The Militant*, 16 December 1933.

progressive dissidents who were anything but advocates of capitalist exploitation. How we address Stalinism thus conditions how we approach the history of Communism.

It is not accidental that in the current oppositional historiographic impasse, especially in its US variant, Stalinism is handled rather loosely and one-dimensionally; often it is reduced to a politics of authoritarianism. Traditionalists like Klehr and Haynes tend to present the history of Communism as a continuity of Bolshevik dictatorship, with Lenin and Trotsky seen as mere forerunners of Stalin: "The Soviet regime was a tyranny from its origins."[45] As Haynes has stated, "The Communist movement founded by the Bolshevik Revolution was tyrannical both in theory and practice," a view reinforced by a conventional historiography of the leadership of the original 1917 workers' state.[46] "Stalin, Trotsky, and Lenin shared more than they disagreed about," writes Robert Service in his 2009 biography of Trotsky. The intentions and practices of the original revolutionary workers' state, founded by Lenin, Trotsky, and others, are presented as congruent with what Stalin later consolidated. It is an odd position to stake out, considering that what Stalin supposedly shared with Trotsky was not sufficient to stop him from exiling the founder of the Left Opposition and, later, orchestrating his assassination.[47]

Ironically, the treatment of Stalinism by revisionists such as Storch is not much different. In this instance, an oppositional historiography becomes a house of mirrors. Storch refers to "the Marxist-Leninist hierarchical style of organization" and congeals "the international communist movement," the rule of Stalin, and "Leninist principles."[48] Counter-posed traditionalist and revisionist studies often address Stalinism similarly, as a kind of "touch-me-not" label tainting understanding rather than opening out into important interpretive avenues. James G. Ryan's biography of Browder, which bridges

45. John Earl Haynes & Harvey Klehr, *In Denial: Historians, Communism and Espionage* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003): 14.

46. John Earl Haynes, "Poison or Cancer? Stalinism and American Communism," *American Communist History* 2 (December 2003): 187.

47. Robert Service, *Trotsky: A Biography* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 3, 497. The ideological claim that Lenin and Trotsky were authoritarian dictators is an old one. See, for instance, Curzio Malaparte, *Coup d'Etat: The Technique of Revolution* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1932). For refusals of this collapsing of Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin, premised on positive views of the Bolshevik Revolution and insistence that figures like Trotsky "nourished the seed of the future" when a "Marxism cleansed of barbarous accretions" would result in the regeneration of the promise of 1917, see Isaac Deutscher's trilogy: *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky, 1879–1921* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954); *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921–1929* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959); *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929–1940* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 522–523. See also E. H. Carr, "The Russian Revolution and the West," *New Left Review* 111 (September 1978): 25–36.

48. Storch, *Red Chicago*, 4, 8, 215; Randi Storch, "American Communism and Soviet Russia: A View from the Streets," *American Communist History* 8 (June 2009): 28.

DOI: 10.1353/llt.2019.0008

these oppositional camps somewhat, both backs away from serious discussion of Stalinism and suggests its pervasive reach in the actual history of American communism. Ryan notes that, "interested as he was in redefining national heroes in a larger democratic context, Browder never restrained his admiration for Joseph Stalin. Although historians are now careful about using the term *Stalinist,* Browder employed it proudly throughout his entire career. As party chief he deliberately copied the Soviet dictator's false modesty and made certain everyone knew that Stalin, too, was a quiet person."[49]

Stalinism II: A Necessary Analytic Construct

In the United Kingdom, Kevin Morgan, prone to reference what he designates a contemporary post-Stalinist left, has called on scholars of Communism to avoid compartmentalizing the experience of revolutionary militants aligned with the Soviet Union. He refers to the problem of reclaiming the inspiring moments of struggle in which Communists figured so centrally without addressing "the complicating factor of Stalinism (or of course vice versa)."[50] This suggests there is another historiographic way, an interpretive path that takes us away from the chasm separating the clashing interpretive schools of contemporary writing on Communism. Such an orientation refuses the opposition of Moscow Rules vs. Communist Agency, Autonomy, and Area, not by rejecting any of these dimensions but by incorporating all of them.

This call for a truly holistic, totalizing history is admittedly audacious. Research animated by such a perspective will necessarily make choices about the best way to approach Communism as a research subject. In exercising different options it is perhaps inevitable that historians will lean in one

49. James G. Ryan, *Earl Browder: The Failure of American Communism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 2. See also Edward P. Johanningsmeier, "The Profintern and the 'Syndicalist' Current in the United States," in LaPorte, Morgan & Worley, eds., *Bolshevism*, 284.

50. Kevin Morgan, "Parts of People and Communist Lives," in McIlroy, Morgan & Campbell, eds., *Party People*, 26. The difficulty with Morgan's position, which I treated unfairly in an earlier commentary (Palmer, "Rethinking the Historiography," 171), is that he asserts that "in the lives of the majority of 'ordinary' Communists the Soviet dimension was, by all empirical indices, demonstrably a subsidiary element." Morgan, "Parts of People," 26. We need to know much more about what these empirical indices are. Morgan's presumption that the left is currently "post-Stalinist" can also be contested, and Isaac Deutscher's comment from 1953 seems particularly prescient: "As society's guardian Stalin exercised control so tyrannically that he deprived his ward of any intrinsic political identity. In time Soviet society grew tired of the harness of Stalinism and was anxious to throw it off; but it had also grown so accustomed to the harness that it could take no step without it." Deutscher, *Russia after Stalin* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953): 95–96. A Bonapartist regime, constituted within the Bolshevik Revolution and fostering the degeneration of that revolutionary accomplishment while continuing to speak in its name, eventually collapsed. This late 20th-century implosion of Stalinism then gave rise to a different Bonapartist regime that utilized the collectivized property and state authority of the world's first workers' state as the primitive accumulation of a frontier-like, particularly predatory, capitalism.

direction or another, accenting either the international origins of policies and revolutionary initiatives or the particularities of place where they were implemented. To fully explore the issues of policy, institutional power, and international developments evident in the Comintern's role as a guiding hand of revolutionary activism *and* the infinitely complex and endlessly proliferating stories and struggles comprising local, regional, and national Communist experience is a tall order. Moreover, precisely how these related spheres are explored entails different methods and sources, all of which demand the mastery of difficult research strategies and conceptual literatures. Local and particularistic studies and attention to rank-and-file activism adds vital flesh and blood to our understanding of Communism in contextualized settings. The skeleton of national and international Communist leadership was nonetheless an anchoring force of such activity, situating mobilizations and campaigns within a powerful body of doctrine, structuring movements for better or for worse. Few historians are likely to produce works that truly encompass all of this. But we can surely strive to reach toward this historical totality, gesturing toward areas weakly developed and acknowledging their influence, rather than insisting on studies defiantly denying dimensions of experience that can only limit understanding.

If this holistic sensibility can be recognized, as I believe it should be, there is still the matter of our political orientation, which is where differences will be registered most acutely. In my case, I commence with acknowledgement of the accomplishments and advances registered with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.[51] Stalinism, which McKay regards as a "toxic term" that must be "applied with scrupulous caution in scholarly work," is not simply a label affixed to Communists in Canada and elsewhere. Rather, it is an explanatory framework. It situates the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the Comintern, and parties and people affiliated with such revolutionary initiatives and institutions around the world within the vice-grip of a tragic defeat. A Stalinist was not simply, as McKay suggests, an admirer of Joseph Stalin or a "person committed to an authoritarian style of politics."[52]

To be a Stalinist was to be many things. Among them, for instance, was the anti-capitalist revolutionary constrained by the defeat of the Revolution, one part of which was objectively conditioned by material realities, another part of which was subjectively constructed by programmatic shifts, some of which seemed left at the same time that they nurtured an overall rightward trajectory. This negated the accomplishments as well as the spirit of 1917. Proletarian internationalism succumbed to "socialism in one country." Nationalization of land holdings and the war against the kulaks seemingly

51. See, for instance, the discussion in Bryan D. Palmer & Joan Sangster, "The Distinctive Heritage of 1917: Revolution's *Longue Durée*," in Leo Panitch & Greg Albo, eds., "2017: Rethinking Revolution," *Socialist Register* 53 (2016): 1–34.

52. McKay, "Joe Salsberg," 133.

DOI: 10.1353/llt.2019.0008

promised to extend collectivized property and widen the reach of socialism, but it did so with a brutalizing disregard for humanity that stamped the Soviet regime as coercive rather than Communist. A reconfigured state, increasingly arbitrary in its decision-making, conducted show-trial campaigns directed against technical experts and functionaries who could prove irksome thorns in the authoritarian side of an emerging Stalinist apparatus given to destructive, unrealizable planning objectives. By 1937 this abuse of judicial power was extended into the political arena. A series of well-publicized Moscow Trials, purges, and executions eliminated the entire generation of revolutionary leadership that had secured the Bolshevik triumph over Czarism. This left Stalin and his sycophantic hangers-on in absolute control of a Soviet state that bore little resemblance to the structures of governance associated with Lenin and the revolutionary practices of 1917. Orchestrated by Stalin, but congruent with the inhibiting climate of revolutionary retreat that materially constrained the possibilities of advancing the nascent workers' republic, this confluence of objective barriers to revolutionary consolidation and subjective Stalinist derailment of the forward march of 1917's promise sounded the death knell of socialism's realization. All of this culminated in a political culture inside the Soviet Union that, by the 1930s, was tyrannical and autocratic. This was less the essence of Stalinism, however, than the awful consequence of a wider process of loss, which slowly but surely registered in disappointment, despair, and defeat.

Contrary to McKay's assertions, then, use of the term "Stalinism" does not necessarily label all Communists in ways that taint them with "conspiracy in mass murder."[53] To suggest this is to bludgeon analytic possibility on the anvil of an assertive moral high ground, in which a conceptualization of Stalinization and Stalinism is regarded as beyond the pale of decent, humane discussion. In contrast, however disquieting and difficult Stalinism may prove to be in our interpretation of the revolutionary left's past, it is a necessary analytic construct. Designating a politics of defeatist retrenchment, Stalinism offers a way of appreciating how genuine anti-capitalist militants and activists, inside and outside of the Soviet Union, lived through the decimation of the historic advances that constituted the Bolshevik victory of 1917. Full consciousness and realization of what was at stake in all of this was often beyond the knowledge of members of the CPC and other national sections of the Comintern, but some knew more than others; leaders, especially those who

53. McKay, "Joe Salsberg," 133. McKay's entire discussion of Stalinism, like so much commentary emanating from both revisionist and traditionalist camps, tends to reduce this Soviet Thermidor to little more than the rise of a totalitarian and dictatorial regime inside the Soviet Union. As I am suggesting, much more was involved in Stalinism, which then came to encompass a multitude of unwholesome features.

had been to the Soviet Union, were privy to understandings that ordinary rank-and-file members could never have gleaned.[54]

There was no uniform, monolithic embrace of Stalinism, and those who continued to identify with the Soviet Union, the Communist International, and its leader, Joseph Stalin, did so in a variety of ways that ranged from disbelief and subdued criticism to bellicose endorsement and blind support. Suggesting that we avoid use of a term like "Stalinism" because it somehow denigrates those Communists who did not break decisively from it when, it must be recognized, others did is an evasion of what needs to be confronted. We can, of course, be careful and judicious in our use of the term "Stalinist," but this necessarily involves actually dealing with what Stalinism was, exploring why it developed and what it constituted. Doing this suggests how it might affect Communists in Canada, at the levels of both leadership and rank-and-file members of a Party that looked to Stalin and the Soviet Union he led for inspiration and political authority.

The critical point of departure in any consideration of Stalinism is recognition that it constituted no continuity with the original revolutionary regime, established in 1917. Tariq Ali has rightly concluded, "With the advent of Stalinism, everything changed."[55] It was a reversal of the Revolution's trajectories and a defeat of its meaning. This outcome was not necessarily, in its origins, a conscious assault on the revolutionary project. The defeat was instead conditioned and nurtured in specific material conditions predating Stalinism proper, but structuring its later development. These material limitations were all substantial brakes on the development of socialism. They included the exacting costs of the Bolsheviks coming to power during the crisis of war and the ways in which a global capitalism rallied in opposition to the revolutionary purposes and significant symbolism of a successful proletarian revolution, strangling possibility in the tightening grip of blockades both ideological and physical. The backwardness that the newly consolidated Soviet republic inherited from a semi-feudal Czarist autocracy was a considerable inhibition. A constrained and unevenly developed Russian industrial base and the enormous preponderance of the peasantry and its consciousness of proprietorial small holdings took their toll on revolutionary attempts to promote the collectivized political economy, a foundational building block in constructing socialism out of this underdeveloped social formation. The setbacks to the international revolutionary movement occurring in Western Europe, especially the failure of the German Revolution, which coincided with

54. As examples of leading Canadian figures who clearly knew more than they let on, see, for instance, the later statements of or comments about Tim Buck, Joe Salsberg, and Peter Krawchuk in Buck, *Yours in the Struggle: Reminiscences of Tim Buck* (Toronto: NC Press, 1977); Tulchinsky, *Joe Salsberg*; Krawchuk, *Our History: The Ukrainian Labour-Farmer Movement in Canada, 1907–1991* (Toronto: Lugus, 1996).

55. Tariq Ali, *The Idea of Communism* (London: Verso Books, 2009), 54. It follows, of course, that if everything changed with Stalinism, it is a phenomenon that can hardly be ignored.

DOI: 10.1353/llt.2019.0008

the incapacitation and eventual death of Lenin, meant that the continuity of the Russian Revolution was, by 1923–24, threatened seriously.

Stalin, whose role in actually realizing the Revolution in 1917 had been minimal, was an effective organizer, and he soon proved, in this difficult context of the mid-1920s, an extraordinarily adroit (and ruthless) apparatus man. He embodied the conservative impulses of the increasingly privileged layer of administrators within the struggling workers' state. Weakening, then marginalizing, his opponents, Stalin was able to gain control over the levers of Soviet state power, just as he subsequently achieved a hegemonic hold within the Comintern. Trotsky's tendency to temporize and then retreat made things easier for Stalin, as did the old Bolshevik leadership's collective loyalty to the revolutionary state and the willingness on the part of these Marxist-Leninists to compromise much to preserve Soviet authority and the continuity of power, seemingly wrested from aristocratic and bourgeois forces. Leninism itself was then subject to revision, even reversal.

With Stalin regarded as an authoritative commentator on Leninism (as on all matters theoretical and political), the perversion of Lenin's ideas was astounding. With respect to the state, for instance, Lenin's political commitment to freedom was lost in Stalinism's equation of state power and socialist security. Lenin's critical understanding that a highly disciplined proletarian party was needed to lead the Revolution and defeat capitalist and temporizing reformist adversaries to achieve class rule of the workers was never meant to suggest that this dictatorship of the proletariat was anything more than an initial, and temporary, phase in the transition from socialism to Communism. As he argued in *The State and Revolution* (1917), Lenin envisioned the state as an agent of class repression withering away, unleashing a new era of liberation for humankind under classless Communism. Transitional forms of negotiating the relations of state, party, and class, such as the soviets, were, in Lenin's view, means to achieve proletarian hegemony, rather than extensions of Party rule, which they hardened into under Stalin.[56]

As difficult and protracted as the transition from socialism to Communism proved to be – again material conditions intruded to constrain the Soviet experiment – Stalinism's influence certainly did not lead, even at the level of abstract theory, in the direction of lessening the power of the state. On the contrary, the Stalinist state strengthened, even to the point of itself becoming synonymous with socialist advance. By 1926–27 the revolutionary proletarian internationalism associated with the Comintern in the time of Lenin and Trotsky was being snuffed out. Preserving the ostensible socialist Soviet state became the primary consideration of revolutionaries inside and outside of the Soviet Union according to Stalin's new doctrine. Under the banner of

56. V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution: Marxist Teaching on the State and the Task of the Proletariat in the Revolution* (London and Glasgow: Socialist Labour Press, 1919). See also Peter Campbell, "Understanding the Dictatorship of the Proletariat: The Canadian Left and the Moment of Socialist Possibility in 1919," *Labour/Le Travail* 64 (Fall 2009): 51–74.

"Socialism in One Country," the mechanisms of Stalinist authority suffocated any serious hope of extending revolution internationally. Defence of the "socialist fatherland" codified a trajectory of defeat reinforced in capitalism's buoyant, if unbalanced, post–World War I consolidation.

International Defeats and Soviet Domestic Deterioration

As this capitalism faltered in the 1930s, the high costs imposed on the international workers' movement by this Stalinist retrenchment were revealed. The political retreat from the strategy of World Revolution, the cause that had animated the Bolsheviks and galvanized a militant global working class at its high point in 1919, was decisive in remaking the Soviet workers' republic into something quite alien to its founders. Certain economic gains of the 1917 Revolution remained, especially the collectivization of capitalist property and the expropriation of the ruling class of the *ancien régime*, but the political caste that now occupied the commanding heights of the Soviet Union was subordinate to Stalin. His regime, its consolidation and survival reified in the program of "Socialism in One Country," justified by the leader's redraftings of Marxist positions on "the national question" and popularly extended in a growing "cult of the personality," was increasingly arbitrary, dictatorial, and abusive.[57]

Over the course of the later 1920s and 1930s, potential revolutionary opportunities became bloody defeats, the most noteworthy of which were the abortion of the Chinese Revolution in 1926–27, Hitler's largely uncontested accession to power in 1933, and the tragic defeat of the revolutionary left in the Spanish Civil War. Within the Soviet Union itself, all manner of critics of Stalin – including but not restricted to Trotskyist Left Oppositionists, as well as the merely recalcitrant – were dealt harsh blows. A machinery of repression was built up, put on display with a series of Moscow show trials, buttressed by confessions of those subject to slander and threats, oiled with the blood of revolutionaries who fell to prosecutorial murder. Among those dispensed with were a differentiated corps of Marxist-Leninists, including Zinoviev, Bukharin, and Kamenev, none of whom, by 1929–30, could be identified with Trotsky. Yet they were all possible threats to Stalin's rule and had to be vilified as part of the demonized Trotskyist conspiracy to undermine the Soviet socialist society. It took some time for the details of this Stalinist repression to be known and, indeed, it is possible that we will never be fully apprised of what transpired in this reactionary Thermidor. Yet, enough was apparent that

57. See, among many possible discussions, David Brandenberger & Mikhail V. Zelenov, "Stalin's Answer to the National Question: A Case Study of the Editing of the 1938 *Short Course*," *Slavic Review* 73 (Winter 2014): 859–880; Victoria E. Bonnell, *The Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

DOI: 10.1353/llt.2019.0008

Trotsky could defend himself vigorously in 1937, refuting the onslaught of lies and defamation emanating from the Moscow Trials.[58]

Seeing Communism Whole/Reconfiguring the Historiography

All of this must be considered when writing the history of Communism, not only in Canada, but everywhere. This need not detract from accounts of the strikes, industrial organizing campaigns, struggles for social justice, and appreciations of the contributions to revolutionary aesthetics – all realms in which Canadian Communists made notable advances.[59] In recognizing such positive achievement, why is it necessary to sidestep the extent to which the Stalinized leadership of the Comintern and the Communist Party of Canada set a certain stage on which Moscow-aligned militants functioned? If we are to study Communism, can we simply bypass all that this entailed? This included the shifting of policy arbitrarily and wrongly, as well as the disciplining of leaders and others who stepped out of line. It encompassed alternating between stands that isolated the movement in sectarian marginalization or watered down the politics of opposition in alliances with a liberal wing of the ruling class. The Soviet Union, once a beacon of possibility for progressives throughout the world, exhibited unmistakable signs of depressing degeneration over the course of the 1930s.

If we are to explore meaningfully the dimensions of the theatre within which revolutionary actors in the country's past both read their lines and improvised scenes of struggle, we will need to appreciate that international, national, and local developments all contributed to what happened. Much can be gained by studying discrete components of Canada's history of the revolutionary left, and no one should be faulted for using the detail of a community/regional study or the prism of a particular event or aspect of left-wing experience to highlight a specific interpretive orientation. But losing sight of other expansive

58. See John Dewey et al., *Not Guilty: Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials* (New York: Harper's, 1937). For a full discussion of the repression of 1937, see Vadim Z. Rogovin, *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror* (Oak Park, Michigan: Mehring Books, 1998).

59. On the cultural front, the writings on the United States are extensive and include Denning, *Cultural Front*; James F. Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy over Leftism in Literature* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991); and the monumental trilogy by Alan M. Wald: *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of a Mid-Twentieth Century Literary Left* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); *American Night: The Literary Left in the Era of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012). Canadian contributions include James Doyle, *Progressive Heritage: The Evolution of a Politically Radical Literary Tradition in Canada* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002); Candida Rifkind, *Comrades and Critics: Women, Literature and the Left in 1930s Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Alan Filewod, *Committing Theatre: Theatre Radicalism and Political Intervention in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2011).

pictures that parallel and overlap with such understandably focused political landscapes inevitably weakens understandings of Communism and narrows unduly how it is represented. It leaves us ill suited to appreciate Communist experience in all its dimensions, regardless of whether it is being depicted in its local/regional, national, or international manifestations. Finally, it severely limits our capacity to make judgements about a history that can then be translated into the politics of our particular present.

Historiographically, this suggests that we must transcend the oppositional analytics of treatments of Communists, in which they are represented dichotomously as being either subordinate to Moscow or as autonomous agents whose determined pursuit of a better world followed paths shaped by local considerations and conditions. It was never a question of people being simply this *or* that. It may be that specific researchers decide to hold to interpretive positions rooted in such oppositional stands. But if they are to do this, they owe it to those who have staked out different ground in this debate to represent them fairly.

Complicating Received Historiographic Wisdoms

In reading the articles by Patrias and Eaton, it is clear that the historiographic simplifications and distortions evident in the Endicott-McKay characterizations of writing on Canadian Communism have been assimilated to one degree or another. But complicating questions need to be raised before these Endicott-McKay knockabout caricatures are reproduced as the basis of a new consensus. Patrias, for instance, states that "a growing number of students of labour and the left in both Canada and the United States stress that far from comprising a monolithic movement that followed directives from Moscow 'slavishly,' communist-led labour unions in North America were shaped by local economic and political conditions." But who has ever presented Communist parties as monoliths, or the unions they led as nothing more than pawns of the Comintern?[60] And as I have shown above, claims that the cpc has been reduced in some writing to nothing more than subordination to Moscow are, at best, much exaggerated. Citing McKay favourably as arguing that "we need to understand Canadian Communists in the context of their own society," Patrias presents the historiography in a way that flattens complexities, reducing interpretive difference to little more than a stilted contest pitting the untenable against the reasonable.[61]

60. Patrias, "Immigrants," 82. Since I am named explicitly in the McKay article ("Joe Salsberg") that Patrias cites approvingly, it needs to be stated that I have *never* addressed Communist parties as monoliths, as is abundantly clear in works such as Palmer, *A Communist Life*; Palmer, "Maurice Spector"; Palmer, *James P. Cannon*.

61. Patrias, "Immigrants," 82. McKay is engaged in a project that extends well beyond the admonition that we must assess Canadian Communists with an appreciation of their embeddedness in a particular society – something that no serious historian would oppose. He

DOI: 10.1353/llt.2019.0008

Understanding Canadian Communists in the context of their own society is mandatory, but research conducted in ways sensitive to this admonition can hardly bypass what was going on in the Soviet Union. Mainstream Canadian culture and politics certainly did not disassociate homegrown Communist militants and their Soviet association. Moreover, such Moscow-aligned leftists considered themselves not only residents of Welland, immigrants from Poland, trade union activists and leaders, or citizens of Canada, but also, on occasion, as internationalists with loyalties to the Soviet Union, even to Stalin.[62]

"When Stalin died," recalled the Winnipeg Communist Clara Zuken, "do you know what? I cried. We were somewhere – the Ukrainian Labour Temple – someone said he died and I stood up there and cried as if I had lost my

is also intent on establishing a relentlessly revisionist account of the left, in which he posits a periodization of left formations that congeals significant differences and lumps together political tendencies. This orientation elides much and slides over too many differences. It also necessitates downplaying the significance of Stalinism. See McKay, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals*, 169–183, which presents a valuable discussion of the CCF and the CPC that nonetheless passes over differences between the two parties too easily. For discussion of the pre-Communist experience in this vein, see McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People's Enlightenment in Canada, 1890–1920* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2008), and the critique in Bryan D. Palmer, "Radical Reasoning," *Underhill Review: A Forum of History, Ideas, and Culture* (Fall 2009), https://www3.carleton.ca/underhillreview/09/fall/reviews/palmer.htm. In McKay's "Joe Salsberg," this congealing of political tendencies is extended: "Communists were a much more variegated and diffuse *cohort*, only a minority of whom were in a given year officially party members, functioning within an even more general *revolutionary formation* made up of communists, social democrats, anarchists, anti-unemployment activists, 'hall socialists', ethnic activists, and an emergent civil rights movement, all of whom wanted the top-to-bottom transformation of Canadian society" (p. 133). This kind of reduction of all political parties and tendencies on the left to a so-called revolutionary formation has the inevitable consequence of presenting the history of communism with the Communism left out. Did the affiliation of Canadian Communists with a party that was subject to incessant public denigration and state repression, membership in which could cost militants their jobs and subject them to social ostracism, really mean so little that they can be placed in a category so undifferentiated as McKay's "revolutionary formation"? For this formation included other political parties opposed to Communism, adherents of anti-vanguardist views such as anarchists, and all manner of others dedicated to social justice issues but perhaps hostile to the Soviet Union and resistant to fundamental tenets of Communism's conceptualization of class struggle and the politics of social transformation. Note the historiographic referencing of *Rebels, Reds, Radicals*, 124 in Polec, *Hurrah Revolutionaries,* 108, which quotes McKay, whose position in this 2005 text was more acknowledging of Comintern influence than is evident in his 2014 comment on Tulchinsky's *Joe Salsberg*: "The Communist Party of Canada often seemed like, and has been described as, little more than a passive recipient of Moscow directives. Certainly in the years following 1928 (when the Communists became more and more integrated into the workings of the Communist International) or 1932 (when the Comintern papers suggest a clamping down on the Canadian party), the description matches up with important parts of reality. Yet, characteristically, radical formations in Canada change over time."

62. Campbell and McIlroy comment that historians who explore the "psyche of [Communist] activists" by ignoring "the centrality of the Soviet Union and Stalinism," replacing these dimensions of identification with "trade union loyalism and anti-fascism," miss much. See McIlroy & Campbell, "Peripheral Vision,"138.

father." Her husband, long-time Communist municipal politician Joe Zuken, did not harbour the same feelings of fidelity, commenting to Clara quietly, "It should have happened a few years ago." During the Moscow purges of the 1930s, Joe and his brother, Bill Ross, argued bitterly about the so-called sabotage of socialism that Stalin's prosecutor alleged old Bolsheviks such as Bukharin, Kamenev, Radek, and Zinoviev had committed. Bill defended the *execution* of these seasoned revolutionaries, his belief in their "heinous crimes" unshakable. His brother thought otherwise. Insisting that these Bolshevik leaders were "giants" incapable of turning traitor against the Revolution, Joe did not believe they were guilty of any wrongs aside from having "differences of opinion with Stalin." Wives, brothers, husbands – loyal Communists all, they could nonetheless stake out different ground on which to stand as dedicated Party people in Canada. Some saw Stalin as the representative of the Revolution's accomplishments; others regarded him less reverentially. Their identities were not singular, but plural. And how those identities were lived could be complex, multi-faceted, even at odds within a specific ethno-cultural-political group. This process was seldom entirely divorced in Canada from the impact of Stalinism and Moscow's influence in determining CPC policies. All of this reached into the hearts and minds, as well as the political campaigns, social struggles, and everyday activities, of rank-and-file Communists.[63]

Patrias contributes to this kind of layered history with her empirical exploration of how immigrants and Communists interacted in the Niagara district, building an impressive trade union presence that advanced not only labour rights, but immigrant citizenship. So it is not necessary, in my view, to premise her piece on an oppositional conceptual foundation with respect to her approach to Communism, in which local conditions are elevated above international influence. Indeed, in previous writing, Patrias has shown how "Hungarian communists in Canada conscientiously followed the party line." She provides a specific example of "the vagaries of party line rather than deep conviction" seeming to "inform the proletarian approach to women's issues." In 1934, Hungarian Communists in Canada supported women's access to abortion, then illegal, noting that bourgeois women could afford and successfully seek out the medical procedure, despite legal prohibitions, while poor, working-class women were effectively barred from terminating unwanted pregnancies. Two years later, in 1936, with the Soviet Union outlawing abortion in a Stalinist turn to pronatalism (which was aligned with the programmatic direction of "Socialism in One Country"), these very same Hungarian

63. Doug Smith, *Joe Zuken: Citizen and Socialist* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1990), 159, 58. Hinther, in *Perogies and Politics*, uses intersectionality to address the identities of Ukrainian leftists and Communists, focusing on ethnicity and gender. This useful approach could be extended, with dissenting/accommodating positions within Communism being considered as part of pluralized identity.

DOI: 10.1353/llt.2019.0008

advocates of the CPC turned against abortion.[64] It is no slight to say that Patrias advances considerably our knowledge of labour, ethnicity, and Communism in her recent study of trade union struggles in the Niagara Peninsula, but that she does this with a decided privileging of the class and ethnic dimensions of this history. We come away from her article better informed on a range of issues, but with many questions about how Communist militants in this region of Ontario functioned and what their relationship to a Toronto and Moscow leadership actually was.

Patrias also cites Jim Mochoruk's fascinating discussion of the debates and factional alignments that characterized the relationship of Ukrainian Communist Party adherents and the Anglo-Celtic leadership contingent composed of Tim Buck, Stewart Smith, Leslie Morris, and others. Mochoruk shows that the Communist Party of Canada was not some homogenous, monolithic entity, but rather was riven by political debate and contentious discussion. That said, Mochoruk can hardly be marshalled to sustain the claim that Moscow's directives were not influential and that the CPC's Ukrainian members were somehow autonomous enough to stand their own victorious local ground against the Comintern and its Toronto national leadership. Mochoruk notes at the beginning of his article that Winnipeg's Ukrainian Communists did not "always follow the path laid down by" the Party leadership, resisting Bolshevization and other developments from 1924 to 1931. These ethnic Communists nonetheless remained faithful soldiers of the International. Mochoruk notes, "Constitutions were amended to meet the requirements of the party line, self-criticism was 'freely' engaged in by these organizations' leaders, and the ultimate wisdom of the CPC and the Comintern was conceded at every turn in the party-affiliated Ukrainian-language press."

The Ukrainian Communists were a powerful presence within the CPC. Their resources and numerical preponderance (Finns and Ukrainians claimed, in the mid-1920s, to make up 4,000 of the Canadian Party's total membership of 4,500) meant that it was simply not possible for Buck and Company to insist that the Ukrainians whip themselves into Comintern shape on every syllable emanating from Moscow or Toronto. The Ukrainian leader, Matthew Popovich, was often a thorn in the side of the CPC leadership, and he and other Winnipeg ethnic figures cultivated a relationship with "Moscow Jack" Macdonald, a Toronto-based dissident well placed in the Party hierarchy. The almost constant skirmishing between Winnipeg's Ukrainian left-wing and Buck and his cohort of Lenin School Anglophone Stalinists might well be interpreted as an indication of local autonomy and stubborn independence.

64. Carmela Patrias, *Patriots and Proletarians: Politicizing Hungarian Immigrants in Interwar Canada* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 206–207. For the Stalinist turn to pronatalism, see Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); David L. Hoffmann, "Mothers in the Motherland: Stalinist Pronatalism and Its Pan-European Context," *Journal of Social History* 34 (2000): 35–54.

Yet Ukrainian Communists were not quite freethinking outliers in a movement of movements. In the end, after the Canadian Party moved to expel both Maurice Spector and Jack Macdonald, respectively, in 1928 and 1931, the Comintern dictated a prudent course of mollifying the Ukrainians and co-opting them into the Third Period "left turn." If this angered some hard-liners in the Toronto leadership, it resulted in a Popovich-Buck public rapprochement. The Ukrainians "conceded the necessity of CPC control over the party fractions in the Ukrainian organizations and indicated the Ukrainian party members' agreement with all the central tenets of the Comintern line." John Weir, recently graduated from the Lenin School, received Moscow's stamp of approval for a leading post in the Ukrainian National Fraction Branch. Placed in charge of a new Ukrainian-language journal, Weir was chosen over long-time Party maverick John Navis. As Mochoruk concludes, the Ukrainians were "brought to heel" precisely because as Communists, however dissident, they could not bring themselves to carry on their struggle outside of the Communist International. They "swallowed their personal pride, hid their growing doubts, and eventually silenced their personal criticisms and soldiered on, always keeping their organizations within the orbit, if not exactly the warm embrace, of the party."[65]

A final internal conflict erupted in 1935–36. Danylo Lobay, a journalist/editor with years of experience working on Ukrainian socialist and communist papers, openly criticized Stalinist policies in the Soviet Ukraine. Myroslav Irchan, a popular Ukrainian Canadian playwright and Communist activist who returned to the Ukraine, and Ivan Sembay, a teacher-organizer deported from Canada to the Soviet Ukraine in 1932, fell victim to Stalinist repression between 1933 and 1937. Both were arrested, incarcerated, and executed. Lobay's public expression of concern over what was happening in the Soviet Ukraine, and his pointed suggestions that Ukrainian Communist leaders well placed to know about such developments were keeping the truth from the Party rank-and-file in Canada, earned him a stiff rebuke. He was denounced for "counterrevolutionary nationalist deviation." *Pravda* (Truth) was launched to promote the Lobayite views, its founders then singled out in the pages of *The Worker* as having "betrayed our class." Exiled from the CPC, the Lobayites, with small pockets of support across the country, were subject to the Party's harsh retribution when Matthew Popovitch successfully sued *Pravda* for libel. The oppositional paper was unable to cover the $1,550 court judgement. Popovitch responded by garnisheeing the wages of three working-class co-defendants.

65. The above paragraphs quote liberally from and draw freely upon Jim Mochoruk, "'Pop & Co' versus Buck and the 'Lenin School Boys': Ukrainian Canadians and the Communist Party of Canada," in Rhonda L. Hinther & Jim Mochoruk, eds., *Re-imagining Ukrainian Canadians: History, Politics, and Identity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 331–375. See also Joan Sangster, "*Robitnytsia*, Ukrainian Communists, and the 'Porcupinism' Debate: Reassessing Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in Early Canadian Communism, 1922–1930," *Labour/Le Travail* 56 (Fall 2005): 51–90.

DOI: 10.1353/llt.2019.0008

Lobay relocated to Toronto, where he established working relations with the small Canadian Trotskyist movement.[66]

This hardly justifies downplaying the significance of Comintern influence, or understating its capacity to behave in domineering ways. In his brief comment on Communist Party of Canada historiography, setting up an informative discussion of the Canadian Labour Defense League's opposition to Section 98 and its use against Buck and other Communists, including Popovich, Eaton notes that "historians of the CPC have long been uniformly consumed by a single debate: to what extent the party was tightly controlled from abroad." He situates my own contribution as outside of a traditionalist framework of simplistic Comintern dominance. Referencing a 2005 *Labour/Le Travail* article on Maurice Spector, James Cannon, and the origins of Canadian Trotskyism, Eaton quotes me as saying that "dissident streams within the Bolshevik tradition" help us to recognize "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." As far as it goes this is fine, but Eaton shifts gears a few pages later. He accepts Endicott's distortion of my representation of Canadian Communists as "'the product of subservience' and 'slavish adherence' to the Comintern." The contradiction evident in Eaton's article is that on one page I am represented as outside of an older historiography fixated on Moscow domination, while a few pages later I am situated directly within the confines of this same distorting historiographic tradition. This again speaks to the capacity of scholars to assimilate skewed summaries of positions, adapting themselves to a socially constructed consensus that will not bear close and rigorous scrutiny.[67]

Something of this problem also emerges in Eaton's summary of the writing of John Manley on the Canadian Communist Party. Manley's many articles on the subject constitute a series of differentiated reflections rich in their research and sophisticated in their analysis. As a body of work, these articles are a recognition of complexity. Because they focus on particulars and offer interpretation based on discrete aspects of Canadian Communism, however, they come to no overall conclusion with respect to the dichotomous historiography. At times, Manley tilts toward the American revisionist camp, while in other writing he leans more toward a traditionalist emphasis on Comintern domination. Reading the entirety of his publications, it is clear that Manley acknowledges the role of Stalinization and Comintern influence, situated

66. Andrij Makuch, "Fighting for the Soul of the Ukrainian Progressive Movement in Canada: The Lobayites and the Ukrainian Labour-Farmer Temple Association," in Hinther & Mochoruk, eds., *Re-imagining Ukrainian Canadians*, 376–400. There is much on Irchan in Sangster, "*Robitnytsia*," and Peter Krawchuk, *The Unforgettable Myroslav Irchan: Pages from a Valiant Life* (Edmonton: Kobzar, 1998).

67. Quotes in this paragraph from Eaton, "'A Sharp Offensive,'" 47, 50. Eaton is quoting Palmer, "Maurice Spector," 94–95, not 91–92 as indicated.

within a periodization of international Communism's development, as well as attending to national circumstance, local peculiarities, and the agency and activism of Canadian leaders and rank-and-file militants. In Eaton's assessment of Manley, however, this complex, if unfinished, oeuvre is collapsed into a revisionist "history from below": "despite the party leadership's staunch support for Stalin and his directives in the late 1920s, it was the local organizers and the party members themselves who determined the party's direction."[68]

This is too categorical and one-sided a judgement to do justice to the diversity of positions evident in Manley's different articles. It is not difficult to find counter-statements, such as this conclusion to Manley's discussion of Communist trade union policy and practice in Britain, Canada, and the United States during the Third Period:

> Set against Moscow's record of uprooting apparently entrenched national leaders, summoning others for political re-education, using Lenin School graduates as a mobile political commissariat, and installing compliant leaderships prepared to accept every twist and turn of the line as the last word in Marxist theory, these three national experiences reveal no significant degree of autonomy or initiative from below. The very disposability of the red union line showed that what really mattered was the power to make and break policy in the interests of Socialism in One Country. And as clear-eyed Communists had recognized since 1929, the leaders of that country held all meaningful power.[69]

Eaton also congeals markedly different studies in his historiographic "from the bottom up" camp. He lumps together texts that can surely be considered at odds – if only on the question of Stalinism or the significance of the writings of Theodore Draper – such as Storch's *Red Chicago* and Zumoff's *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919–1929*.[70]

In raising these issues I want to close by repeating that I am not suggesting that the Patrias and Eaton articles do not make important contributions to scholarship in their own right. They do. But they also reveal, in their reading of the historiography of Communism, a willingness to assimilate uncritically characterizations put forward by others, whose representation of authors can certainly be questioned. Just why Patrias, Eaton, and many others borrow so uncritically from scholars such as Endicott and McKay remains a question difficult to answer definitively. Whatever the reason, the result is that an opportunity to extend understanding of Stalinism's meaning is missed. Certain critical questions about those in the Canadian Communist Party who dedicated a good part of their lives, and admirably so, to fighting for labour's rights and other causes of social justice tend not to be asked. Scholars inclined to accept the positions espoused by Endicott and McKay need to engage more seriously with just what they are endorsing and how this frames their own

68. Eaton, "'A Sharp Offensive,'" 47.

69. John Manley, "Moscow Rules? 'Red Unionism' and 'Class against Class' in Britain, Canada, and the United States, 1928–1935," *Labour/Le Travail* 56 (Fall 2005): 49.

70. Eaton, "'A Sharp Offensive,'" 47.

DOI: 10.1353/llt.2019.0008

work, situating it in ways that perhaps unnecessarily confine findings and meanings. Neither Endicott nor McKay addresses Stalinism frontally, although their avoidance of this issue is animated by different impulses. Endicott shies away from interrogations of the Communist International and its leadership. McKay, whose past writings have acknowledged that Comintern policies in the Third Period did indeed err on the side of ultra-leftism and sectarianism, now seems committed to situating Canadian Communists as part of a broad left formation whose reasoning otherwise his entire analytic framework is dedicated to validating. That both Endicott and McKay misrepresent the views of historians who do not embrace their perspective is evident in how they characterize writings on Communism one-sidedly.

In their differing commentaries on Manley's articles on the CPC, McKay and Endicott also suggest how historiographic classifications in this political minefield can be troublingly subjective. It is difficult not to see in the contrasting McKay and Endicott appraisals of Manley's contribution to the study of Canadian Communism evidence of how the historiography in this field can drift into commentaries of problematic personalization. McKay, for instance, places Manley above the historiographical oppositional fray, noting that Manley recognizes Comintern influence, even domination, as well as acknowledging how specific national and local circumstances provided a context in which militant struggles developed. This two-sidedness is, in my view, congruent with my own orientation, although it is understandable that differences separate Manley's scholarship and my own, not the least of which relates to our detailed, empirical researches being conducted in different national contexts.[71] But in as much as we both recognize the dualism of members of Communist parties being subject to Comintern influence *and* being able to engage in militant mobilizations and important acts of resistance and organizing, it also allows commentators to latch on to one argumentative edge to distort the nuances of analytic positions. That McKay can praise Manley while Endicott castigates him is telling, with Manley going from being, in McKay's judgement, the *doyen* of Communist Party historiography to Endicott's *dupe.* Endicott represents Manley as insufficiently cognizant of the revolutionary substance of the WUL and refers to him in the preface of *Raising the Workers' Flag* as someone who considers "the Workers' Unity

71. This includes Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, but also a number of texts published after Endicott's and McKay's characterizations of my position in the historiography, but before or at the same time as the appearance of the articles by Patrias and Eaton. Among these would be Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014); Paul Le Blanc, Bryan Palmer, Thomas Bias & Andrew Pollack, eds., *US Trotskyism, 1928–1965: Part I – Emergence: Left Opposition in the United States* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018). And, of course, Palmer & Héroux, *Toronto's Poor* contains an extensive discussion of Communist Party activity among the unemployed and relief recipients in the 1930s that seems congruent with Manley's views.

League to be a 'Canadian success story' and yet at the same time a form of insanity and sectarian excess."[72]

As scholars of the revolutionary left, even as partisans in a history that remains unfinished, it is incumbent upon us to do better. To write histories of Communism that are as good as they can be, we must combine a more rigorous intellectual engagement with the writing in the field and imaginative and disciplined research into a history where there remains much to explore. In fair-minded ways, and especially at the point of disagreement, we should call into question obvious misrepresentation and refuse personalized distortions of analytic positions. Historiographic typecasting of the kind I have identified above does not result in better histories of Communism. Surely we can classify writing in the field critically without distorting it. That done, historians will establish the interpretive direction they want to chart in their studies, which will showcase new empirical research and reasoned analysis. I am not naïve. Consensus is not likely to emerge. But let our differences be aired on the basis of accurate representations of interpretive positions. If this means reading more carefully and fully, backing away from pigeonholing assessments of arguments and analytic stands that we find uncongenial, so be it. We need to be both more demanding of ourselves and more humble before the challenges posed in writing the history of Communism.

72. For McKay's positive evaluation of Manley, see McKay, "Joe Salsberg," 131. Manley's article, "Moscow Rules?," is largely ignored by McKay, even though his essay on Salsberg is largely a repudiation of the "traditionalist" position Manley develops in that particular statement. Manley's "Moscow Rules?" is criticized by Morgan in "Trouble with Revisionism," with Morgan claiming that Manley develops a revisionist straw person to knock down and that Manley's other writing (such as "'Audacity, Audacity, and More Audacity': Tim Buck, the Party, and the People, 1932–1937," *Labour/Le Travail* 49 [Spring 2002]: 9–41) indicated no need to situate himself in either traditionalist or revisionist interpretive camps. Endicott's attack on Manley's view of WUL "insanity" is in *Raising the Workers' Flag*, xi, 340.

DOI: 10.1353/llt.2019.0008