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The Communist International and US Communism, 1919-1929

Jacob A. Zumoff

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By

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In one of my favourite short articles by Lenin from 1913, 'What Can Be Done for Public Education', the Bolshevik leader contrasts the access granted by the New York Public Library to the difficulty of obtaining books in tsarist Russia. In fact, I benefited greatly from the holdings and expertise of the NYPL—including its main research branch and the Schomburg Center in Harlem. Unfortunately,

one hundred years after Lenin wrote that article, in capitalist America many great libraries are, like much of society, private property designated for exclusive use. In light of this, I am thankful to the various friends, colleagues, and acquaintances who helped make it possible to consult material at different university libraries. In particular, I wish to express my everlasting thanks to the unnamed student worker at Harvard's Lamont Library who explained how somebody without a Harvard ID could access the library's amazing microfilm collections. I am also thankful to the Rutgers Alumni Association for allowing all alumni borrowing privileges.

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Jacob A. Zumoff
New York, NY

Abbreviations

ABB	African Blood Brotherhood
ACWA	Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America
AFL	American Federation of Labor
ANLC	American Negro Labor Congress
CCE	Central Cooperative Exchange
CCLP	Cook County Labor Party
CEC	Central Executive Committee
CFL	Chicago Federation of Labor
CI	Communist International, Comintern
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CLA	Communist League of America
CLP	Communist Labor Party
CP	Communist Party
CPA	Communist Party of America
CPC	Communist Party of Canada
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CPPA	Conference for Progressive Political Action
CPUSA	Communist Party USA
ECCI	Executive Committee of the Communist International
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FFLP	Federated Farmer-Labor Party
FLP	Farmer Labor Party
FSF	Finnish Socialist Federation
FSR	Friends of Soviet Russia
FWF	Finnish Workers Federation
GEB	General Executive Board (of IWW)
IFWU	International Fur Workers Union
ILD	International Labor Defense
ILGWU	International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union
IRA	International Red Aid
ITUC-NW	International Trade Union Commission of Negro Workers
IWO	International Workers Order
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
JSF	Jewish Socialist Federation
KUTV	University for the Toilers of the East
LDC	Labor Defense Council
LO	Left Opposition, split from CPA in 1921–2

MOPR	Russian acronym for International Red Aid
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NEC	National Executive Committee (of SP)
RILU	Red International of Labour Unions, Profintern
SLP	Socialist Labor Party
SP	Socialist Party
SPL	Socialist Propaganda League
TUEL	Trade Union Educational League
TUUL	Trade Union Unity League
UBCJA	United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America
UCP	United Communist Party
UFC	United Front Committee (in Passaic strike, 1926–7)
UFEL	United Farmers Educational League
UMWA	United Mineworkers of America
UNIA	Universal Negro Improvement Association
UTW	United Textile Workers
WC	Workers' Council
WDU	Workers Defense Union
W(C)P	Workers' (Communist) Party
WP	Workers' Party
YCL	Young Communist League

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Introduction: History and Historiography of American Communism in the 1920s

In November 1917, the Bolsheviks in Russia seized state power amid the devastation of the World War, announcing that they were proceeding to build socialism. As the American Socialist John Reed put it, the Bolshevik Revolution 'shook the world' by making a workers' state flesh and blood instead of a goal. In Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas, left-wing militants rallied to the Revolution and to the new Third or Communist International (Comintern) that Lenin, Trotsky and other Bolshevik leaders initiated in early 1919. The Bolsheviks envisioned the Comintern as a new, genuine, revolutionary International able to create Communist parties from those socialist militants who rejected the 'social-chauvinism' (support to militarism or imperialism using socialist rhetoric) and parliamentary reformism that had caused the social-democratic Second International to collapse in the face of the War. By summer 1919, the American Communist movement was born, its enthusiasm matched only by its divisions.

This book is a political history of the first decade of the American Communist Party (CP).¹ Above all, this study examines how the early Communists, inspired by the first successful workers' revolution in history, sought to forge a party in the United States capable of making a revolution in that country. In particular, this work analyses the 'Americanisation' of Communism: how Communists understood and applied the lessons of the international Communist movement to American society. Although historians of Communism are divided, there is broad agreement that this 'Americanisation' was counterposed to the 'interference' of the Communist International. This book, on the other hand, argues that in the early 1920s the Comintern helped the early Communists come to grips with American society. By the end of the decade, reflecting the political degeneration of the Russian Revolution under Stalin, the Comintern's interventions were more negative.

Two questions come to mind: why study American Communism in the 1920s? And why do we need *another* study? In much of the world in the

1 As described below, the American Communist movement underwent several splits in its early years, and when it unified in the early 1920s, it first called itself the Workers' Party and Workers' (Communist) Party, and only in 1929 did it become the Communist Party, USA. For the sake of simplicity, the term CP is used to describe the entire party during this period.

1920s, the question as to which class would rule society seemed immediately posed. From 1919–29, Communists in Central Europe repeatedly faced revolution. In England, Communists played a key role in the 1926 General Strike. Communists led revolutionary movements in Indonesia and China. If American Communists avoided the massive repression faced by their international comrades, it is only because they lacked these opportunities. In the popular imagination, American radicalism, after a brief upsurge during the First World War and in the heady days after the Bolshevik Revolution, was beaten back by Red Scare repression and ‘roaring twenties’ prosperity, enduring what a recent study of the American left labelled ‘a dark decade of myopia and division’. Only with the Depression did Communism recover and ‘bloom in the sunlight of a New Deal majority’.²

Judged by numbers alone, this appears correct. While at its birth in 1919 as a split from the Socialist Party (SP), the Communist Party counted tens of thousands of members, it soon atrophied—growing only a decade later during the Great Depression. In 1938, the party had 55,000 members, and in 1945 it had 65,000. Even in 1955, at the height of the Cold War, the FBI estimated that there were almost 23,000 members—almost twice the membership in 1928.³

Yet the importance of Communism in the 1920s is greater than its declining membership. There are several reasons why the Communists of the 1920s are important to study. First, if the child is father of the man, then understanding the ‘mature’ Communist Party of the 1930s requires examining its formative years. (Not just Wordsworth, but Mordecai Richler’s description of Duddy Kravitz should be kept in mind when considering the evolution of the CP: ‘A boy can be two, three, four potential people, but a man only one. He murders the others’).

Second, while the 1920s were not the high point of Communist influence, this was a reflection of the period as much as of the party. F. Scott Fitzgerald described the 1920s as ‘cynical rather than revolutionary’, and observed that it was ‘characteristic of the Jazz Age that it had no interest in politics at all’. Amid this reactionary period, the Communists were the most important left-wing component of the labour movement. The American Federation of Labor

2 Kazin 2011, p. 161.

3 Glazer 1961, pp. 92–3; Communist International 1928a, p. 20. Membership figures—for both the American Communist Party as well as parties in other countries—are notoriously inexact, reflecting fluctuating dues payments, changing definitions of membership, as well as manipulation and biases of party leaders, the press or the government agencies reporting them. Thus any numbers should serve as a general indication of party strength and not an exact census.

(AFL), prostrate in the face of anti-labour attacks, offered no alternative to 'prosperity' politics. When John L. Lewis was not fighting Communists in the miners' union, he was supporting Republican presidents Coolidge and Hoover. Communists played crucial roles in the major labour struggle of the decade, organising textile workers in Passaic, NJ, New Bedford, MA, and Gastonia, NC. Communists were key in the fight to save Italian anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, which symbolised the struggle against injustice in America.⁴

Traditional Historiography of American Communism

The study of American Communism is at once the study of Communists and previous studies of American Communism. The classic debate, as much political as historical, emphasises the question of how 'foreign' (dependent on the Soviet Union) or 'American' (rooted in American radical and labour history) was the Communist movement. The standard Cold War anti-Communist perspective portrayed Communism as a creation of the Soviet Union. Long time head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), J. Edgar Hoover, who built America's anti-Communist repressive apparatus, declared that the archetypal Communist, 'Even though he lives in the United States ... is a supporter of a foreign power, espousing an alien line of thought. He is a conspirator against his country'.⁵

Anti-Communist assumptions motivated many historians. Among these, the historian who stands out, for the depth of his research and analysis and for the clarity of his argument, is former *Daily Worker* writer Theodore Draper (1912–2006). At the height of the Cold War, Draper wrote a two-volume history of the Communist Party in the 1920s. Draper's 1957 book *The Roots of American Communism* and his 1960 work *American Communism and Soviet Russia* are superb studies and remain standard works. Draper interviewed or corresponded with many veterans of the early Communist movement, and collected scattered archival sources. It is impossible to deal with the early Communist Party without taking into account Draper's work.⁶

For Draper, the central question was 'the relation of American Communism to Soviet Russia'. This 'has expressed itself in different ways ... But it has always

4 F. Scott Fitzgerald, 'Echoes of the Jazz Age', cited by Currell 2009, p. 4; Dubofsky and Van Time 1986, pp. 83, 111.

5 Hoover 1959, p. 4. For a recent account of the FBI's spying, see Weiner 2012.

6 Draper 1985; Draper 1986.

been the determining factor, the essential element' in the CP's history. The conclusion of *American Communism and Soviet Russia* answers the question posed by its title: 'even at the price of virtually committing political suicide, American Communism would continue above all to serve the interests of Soviet Russia'. This cut it off from 'other forms of American radicalism such as the open, democratic, pre-World War I Socialist party, the farmer-labor movement, or the syndicalist movement, all of which were far more indigenous and independent than the American Communist party'.⁷

In Draper's analysis, then, a Chinese Wall separated 'American' radicalism and 'foreign' Communism. The Comintern was the extension of Soviet domination that imposed itself on American soil, ignoring or disregarding earlier American radicalism, preventing Communism from becoming an authentically 'American' radical movement. Draper discounted the possibility that the Bolsheviks or other Comintern leaders may have had a *positive* influence on American Communism.

In the 1970s and 1980s, younger historians (often referred to as 'New Left' historians because many had been politically active) fought Draper with a vehemence that may have made him recall the factionalism described in his studies. These 'revisionist' historians did not focus on the 1920s. Instead, they examined times and areas of Communist work that appeared more sympathetic and more successful, for example, work among blacks in the 1930s, during World War II, or among car workers. Influenced both by 'social history' that examined 'history from the bottom up', and by the New Left perspective that 'the personal is political', these historians de-emphasised the 'line' of the party leadership. Instead, using oral history, they emphasised the lived experience of Communists themselves, often lower or mid-level cadres, including 'how activists ... sustain[ed] their morale in an essentially conservative political culture'. (That agreement with the politics of the Communist Party might have helped members sustain their morale seems to have been overlooked).⁸

They downplayed 'Soviet control', depicting the party as having sprouted from native soil. A Communist was not Hoover's foreign agent, but an 'American radical', as proclaimed by the title of a memoir by Steve Nelson, a Communist organiser in Pittsburgh. Social historians insisted that the American Communists were not dependent upon the Soviet leaders, and

7 Draper 1986, pp. 5, 441, 446.

8 Paul Lyons's letter in *New York Review of Books*, 23 June 1994; Important 'New Left' revisionist histories include Isserman 1995 (on World War II); Keeran 1980 (on car workers); Naison 2005 (on black Communists in Harlem); Solomon 1998 (on black Communists); memoirs edited by New Left historians include Healy and Isserman 1980; Nelson, Barrett and Ruck 1981.

that local Communists often acted independently of Communist directives from New York. The most innovative and subtle study was Robin D.G. Kelley's analysis of black Communists in Alabama during the Depression. He demonstrated that while Moscow-influenced politics played a role in Communist policy, rank-and-file Communists on the ground interpreted these broadly and enjoyed wide local autonomy.⁹

In the 1980s, Draper and his opponents crossed swords in the *New York Review of Books*.¹⁰ Although there was no love lost between Draper and his critics, both *accepted* the same framework. The division between 'American' and 'foreign' in American Communism remained undisputed, with the Soviet/Comintern influence unquestionably negative. New Leftists inverted Draper's scheme: they argued that the 'American' traditions were more prominent than Draper allowed.¹¹ By this time, a 'traditionalist' school had developed that agreed with Draper's argument about the American party's relationship to Moscow. Led by Harvey Klehr, this school saw itself as extending Draper's analysis into the 1930s, which Draper had intended to explore but never did.¹²

The present work rejects this concept of Americanisation as counterposed to Comintern guidance. Leninism, as understood by the early Comintern, did not represent a set of formulae or dogmas, but rather the understanding of the need for a political struggle not only against the bourgeoisie but also the social-democratic leadership that had shown its bankruptcy through parliamentarianism and support to the slaughter of World War I. Lenin held that Bolshevism's basic principles, learnt through decades of struggle, were valid to revolutionaries throughout the world: an emphasis on class struggle and working-class independence, instead of opportunism and class-collaborationism; organising a workers' state, instead of reforming the bourgeois state; internationalism and opposition to one's own capitalist rulers, instead of social-imperialism or social-chauvinism; the need for a revolutionary socialist party, instead of unity with opportunists and chauvinists. In 1924, Trotsky identified as the 'essential aspect' of Bolshevism 'such training, tempering, and organization of the proletarian vanguard as enables the latter to seize power, arms in hand' when presented with a revolutionary situation.¹³ Yet Lenin and Trotsky realised that

9 Kelley 1990.

10 Draper's two articles in the *New York Review of Books* (9 May 1985 and 30 May 1985) have been reprinted as the 'Afterword' to Draper 1986; Draper's critics responded in the *New York Review of Books* (15 August 1985 and 26 September 1985).

11 See Naison 1985.

12 See Klehr 1971; Klehr 1978; Klehr 1984. Klehr had the benefit of Draper's research materials.

13 Trotsky 1987, p. 24.

each country had its own history and conditions that required different revolutionary *tactics*.

It would be foolish to deny the importance of Bolshevik influence on the early Communist Party. As party leader C.E. Ruthenberg put it in 1922: 'Without the Russian revolution there would have been no Communist movement in the United States'. Rather than have Communist parties ape the Bolsheviks, however, the early Comintern wanted them to learn the political lessons of the Bolsheviks and apply them to the conditions of each society. At the Third Comintern Congress in 1921, Lenin stated that 'the revolution in Italy will take a different course from that in Russia'. Although the Comintern's 'fundamental revolutionary principles' were the same everywhere, these 'must be adapted to the specific conditions in the various countries'. Although Lenin insisted on splitting from reformists—which put him at odds with Giacinto Serrati at the Congress—he accepted that it 'would have been stupid' for Italian Communists 'to copy the Russian revolution'. Only later, under Stalin (and in the context of a fight in the American Communist Party), did the Comintern argue that capitalist societies were essentially the same throughout the world; differences were at most superficial.¹⁴

Forging a Bolshevik Party in the US did not mean transplanting the Russian experience wholesale to America (or worse, pretending that Russia and America were the same).¹⁵ As will be explored in the following chapters, the Leninist Comintern compelled the American Communists to move beyond their origins as foreign-language-federation-dominated illegal groups, work within the labour movement and address racial oppression. This was done not because the Comintern leadership believed they knew more about America than Americans did, but because without understanding American history or society, it would be impossible to make a revolution there. In fact, the Comintern's Americanisation efforts were often realised in alliance with American Communists who sought to Americanise their party. Among historians in the US, and society at large, there is a provincial prejudice that Americans are best equipped to understand American society. Often this is true. However, leftists from a particular society are also more likely to overlook and succumb to national pressures. Representatives from the international

14 Ruthenberg 1922; Lenin 1965b, pp. 464–5; on Stalin's view of the relationship between world and national capitalism, see Chapter 13 below.

15 That Lenin understood that there was a vast difference between the US and Russia can be seen in his short piece, written in 1913, on the New York Public Library; Lenin 1977, pp. 277–9.

movement may be better able to recognise this, as most clearly demonstrated on the 'Negro question'.

It is also important to underscore the difference between this meaning of Americanisation and what became known as 'Eurocommunism' in the 1970s and 1980s, that is, the idea that Communists in Western capitalist democracies should seek guidance in national traditions and not Soviet Communism. Schooled by international Communism in its Stalinist form, this trend shared with Draper and the New Left historians the view that there existed what one leading Eurocommunist labelled 'a certain contradiction between the objective conditions with which workers' movements in western countries had to contend, and the adoption of the "Russian model" as a doctrinal and political base for Communist parties'.¹⁶

Post-Soviet Historiography

Capitalist counterrevolution and the destruction of the Soviet Union in 1991–2 affected this historiography in two ways. First, and most immediately, it led to the opening of archives in Moscow, including those of the Comintern.¹⁷

¹⁶ Azcárate 1978, p. 16.

¹⁷ Comintern archives are cited here by *fond*, *opisi* and *delo* (for example, 515.1:356). This will allow the researcher who travels to Moscow to locate the file. When this project was begun more than a decade ago, it was necessary to travel to Moscow to consult the files. Since that time, copies have been made for consultation in the United States, including in the European Reading Room of the Library of Congress, the Tamiment Institute at New York University, and the Prometheus Research Library. Since the unfamiliar often have misperceptions, it is important to understand that the files seem to be a testament to the archival practice of 'more product, less process'. Comprising correspondence, draft reports, newspaper clippings, motions, covering letters without enclosures, stenographic reports, handwritten notes and other similar materials—often with the intended recipient's name written on top—the archives at times seem to be based on the personal files of the people involved. Often a discussion or debate will be carried out over several different files. Former German Communist Wolfgang Leonhard helped evacuate the files during the Second World War. He described them as winning 'first place for chaos and confusion' since they contained 'not only whole bundles of Party documents which had been simply stuffed in without even a file-cover being put around them, but also the remains of cinema advertisements, old numbers of the *New York Times*, broken pencils and every kind of rubbish that had not the slightest connection with the archives'; Leonhard 1979, p. 233. Along with the Comintern practice of using pseudonyms, as well as generally sloppy secretarial practices such as not signing or dating documents, this has left the authorship or date of many documents in question. In cases where this is