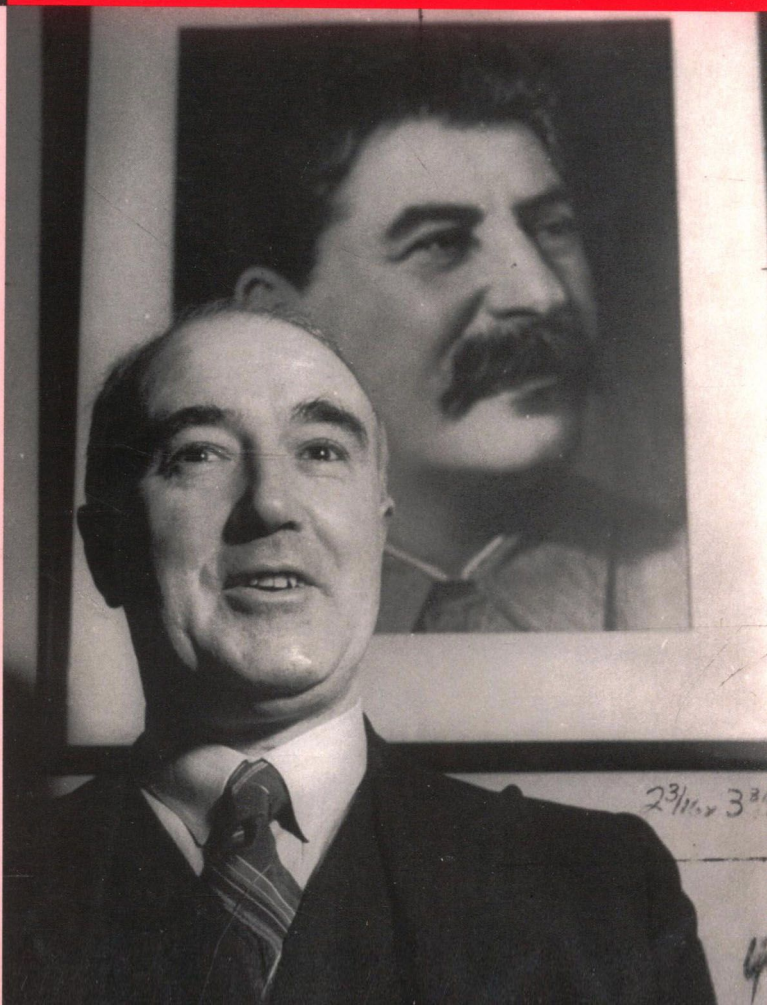
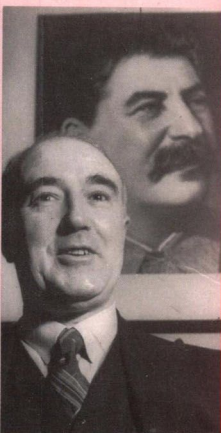


*Documents in Modern History*

# British Communism

A documentary history

JOHN CALLAGHAN & BEN HARKER



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John Callaghan  
and Ben Harker



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Documents in Modern History

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## British Communism

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# Abbreviations

AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
BWSF	British Workers' Sports Federation
CEMA	Council for the Encouragement of Music and Art
CND	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
CPGB	British Communist Party
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CUL	Communist University of London
DATA	Draughtsmen's and Allied Technical workers' Association.
ETU	Electrical Trades Union
ILP	Independent Labour Party
KPD	Communist Party of Germany
NCC	National Cultural Committee
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
PCF	Communist Party of France
PCI	Communist Party of Italy
TGWU	Transport and General Workers Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UCATT	Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians
WMA	Workers' Music Association
WPP	Workers' and Peasants' Parties
WTM	Workers' Theatre Movement
YCL	Young Communist League

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# Introduction

Why do people study the British Communist Party, an organisation with never more than a feeble presence in parliament or local government, and one that was a massive failure by its own measures of success? Let us begin to answer this question by starting where it started in 1920. At this time the importance of the Communist Party was clear. In the calculations of the Communist movement Britain was important both because of its powerful trade union movement, most of which was affiliated to the Labour Party, and also because of the British Empire – the leader of global anti-Communism in the years before the Second World War, but also an immense field of potential anti-imperialist agitation.

Most Communist parties were established after the foundation of the Communist International (Comintern) in Moscow in March 1919. In many countries, including Britain, the inspiration of the founders was both the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 and the prospect of imminent revolutionary change in their own countries – expectations that Lenin shared and encouraged. In the British case the perception of political crisis predated the Great War as rapid growth in trade union membership after 1910, national strikes, constitutional crisis and civil disobedience gave the appearance of momentous change in the making. Total war brought about a further doubling of trade union membership and by 1918–20 there were signs of growing class tensions and a new spirit of rank and file militancy among the organised workers. Indeed, Lenin saw the real basis of a future British Communist Party in the shop stewards' movement of those years. The economic slump of 1921 and chronic unemployment in heavy industrial districts throughout



the 1920s helped to undermine that forecast, but trade unionism remained formidably strong in Britain by international standards and the Communist International continued to regard the British Communist Party (CPGB) as an important section of the Communist movement primarily for this reason. After the disappointments of repeated insurrectionary failures in Germany up to the autumn of 1924, the Comintern's main hope for a breakthrough in Europe focused on the industrial conflicts in Britain that culminated in the General Strike of May 1926. Even after the defeat of the General Strike, expectations of mass radicalisation persisted. Though such projections were disappointed, by the 1930s the CPGB had established permanently strong roots in a variety of industries and unions. It remained prominent in both the national leaderships of the trade unions and their rank and file throughout the period from the Second World War up to the late 1970s.

Throughout these years the strength of the trade unions affiliated to the Labour Party presented the tantalising prospect to the Communists of radicalising 'social democracy' from within. All that the Communist Party had to do was affiliate to the Labour Party itself. When this became impossible, after a Labour Party rule change in 1946, the Communists simply focused on obtaining powerful positions within the Labour-affiliated trade union leaderships, as well as building its strength among the rank and file, from which vantage points they might wield influence within Labour's annual conference and at meetings of its National Executive Committee. In short, influencing the powerful trade unions affiliated to the Labour Party remained a major factor in the calculations of the CPGB until the 1980s. The importance attached to the CPGB by the Comintern rested to a large extent on the same basis.

However, the Comintern was also deeply committed to the overthrow of British imperialism and this was another reason why the CPGB was important. After the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia in October 1917 they made efforts to enlist the support of the many nationalities of the economically backward territories of the Caucasus and Central Asia in their attempts to consolidate the Bolshevik state and undermine the hostile imperialist powers surrounding it, particularly the British Empire. The Bolsheviks demanded self-determination both for the subaltern nationalities of the former Tsarist Empire and for the colonies of the European powers. They promoted October 1917 as an anti-imperialist

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revolution as well as an anti-capitalist revolution. The colonies, they maintained, were 'the Achilles heel of British imperialism' and, by extension, of every other imperialism.<sup>1</sup> The British Communists were charged with responsibility not merely for linking Moscow and the colonies but also for actually promoting Communist influence throughout the Empire. Communist agents were repeatedly sent to establish revolutionary and trade union organisations in India in particular. British Communists such as Ben Bradley and Philip Spratt were eventually successful in these aims, while Rajani Palme Dutt continued to supply advice to the Communist Party of India (CPI) (and link it to Moscow and the Comintern) from the leadership of the CPGB, until the late 1940s. From the beginning of these efforts the CPGB had to reckon with the problem that there were very few Marxists of any persuasion in most territories of the British Empire. Nationalists were more plentiful, though alliances with them had to be managed carefully and were not always possible or even desirable. Complicating and dominating everything was the priority that had to be accorded to the interests of the Soviet Union to which all Communists had given their 'unconditional support' as a condition of joining the Comintern. The 2nd Congress of the Comintern expressed this complication thus:

all events in world politics are necessarily concentrated on one central point, the struggle of the world bourgeoisie against the Russian Soviet Republic, which is rallying round itself both the soviet movements among the advanced workers in all countries and all the national liberation movements in the colonies and among oppressed peoples [...] our policy must be to bring into being a close alliance of all national and colonial liberation movements with Soviet Russia; the forms taken by this alliance will be determined by the stage of development reached by the communist movement among the proletariat of each country or by the revolutionary liberation movement in the underdeveloped countries and among backward nationalities.<sup>2</sup>

Though Lenin in 1920 was insistent that proletarian internationalism demanded that the Soviet state shall 'make the greatest national sacrifices in order to overthrow international capitalism', the opposite was also true;<sup>3</sup> proletarian internationalism demanded 'subordination of the proletarian struggle in one country to the interests of the struggle on a world scale'.<sup>4</sup> Since Lenin himself had characterised world politics as being concentrated on the central point of struggle between the world bourgeoisie and the Soviet Republic,

it was an easy matter to convince Communists to support policies that the Russians demanded – on the grounds that these represented the central ‘contradiction’ of the world struggle – even if they were of dubious value to national ‘sections’ of the Comintern such as the British, or actually destructive of local political opportunities, as they were in the so-called Third Period.

Nevertheless it was a settled Communist conviction that an imperialist epoch characterised by wars, civil wars and revolutions had begun some time in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. The general crisis of capitalism, as Communists called it, involved a crisis of empires. Anti-imperialist struggles culminating in colonial independence would deepen that crisis because the standard of living in countries such as Britain depended on colonial exploitation. This was conventional wisdom among Communists until the 1960s when theories of neo-colonialism tried to explain why decolonisation had not led to the predicted outcomes.

If Britain’s imperial position and the strength of its labour movement explain much of the early interest that Moscow showed in the CPGB, what is it that makes the study of British Communism of interest today? One answer is that the CPGB played a role in the intellectual life of the left that was out of all proportion to its size – especially in the 1930s and 1940s. Even as recently as the 1980s Communists, now changed out of all recognition, led much of the left in coming to terms with Thatcherism. Then, as earlier, Communists played a significant role in the ideological world of socialism in Britain. For many decades this owed a great deal to the authority of the Soviet Union as a pioneer of socialist economics. During the years 1930–60, for example, Soviet models of planning in a state-owned economy fascinated the broader socialist left because they were widely believed to be successful. But Communist political influence could also rest on the party’s ability to shape an alternative programme or platform to those that dominated the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress (TUC), as they did in the construction of the Alternative Economic Strategy in the 1960s and 1970s.

Communists were not simply a significant force in many of the organisations of the British labour movement. They helped to set broader political, cultural and intellectual agendas. In the 1930s, for example, Communists were central to the Left Book Club, which attracted 57,000 members at its height, and functioned as a key institution of the Popular Front period (1935–39).<sup>5</sup> Communists

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also dominated the cultural journal *Left Review* (1934–38), a significant publication in a decade when many prominent writers – including Edgell Rickword, Cecil Day Lewis, Stephen Spender and Hugh MacDiarmid – joined the party.<sup>6</sup> In the middle third of the twentieth century Communist ways of seeing also made their presence felt across a wide range of other cultural forms and media, from the radically accented music of composer Alan Bush or folk-singer and songwriter Ewan MacColl, to the artwork of Barbara Niven or Paul Hogarth, the art history of John Berger, and the politically driven drama of Theatre Workshop and Unity Theatre.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps most significant of all was the Communist Party Historians' Group, whose intellectual authority influenced the historiography of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for several decades after 1945. Two of the original major debates within this group, on absolutism and ideology, produced international agenda-setting research that overturned existing paradigms and structured discussions of the meaning of the English Civil War for years to come. The group responsible for this was never concerned with abstract theory or historical methods per se but was composed of people who actually conducted their own historical research and engaged in the writing of histories. Nevertheless it was a group that was more theoretically sophisticated than most of the non-Marxists historians of the period and most of its members – people such as Christopher Hill and Victor Kiernan – rejected economic determinism (as found in the work of non-Marxists such as R. H. Tawney, Hugh Trevor-Roper and Lawrence Stone) and gave serious attention to the religious, constitutional and other ideological and institutional expressions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century politics and society.

Recent research on the Communist Party has been stimulated by the opening of archives and the greater preparedness of Communists to talk and write about their political commitment and experiences since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. One of the main themes of recent publications on Communism in Britain is the matter of its relationships to the Soviet Union and the British labour movement. An argument about the degree of the CPGB's dependence on Moscow and the extent of its role as an expression of Soviet state interests has developed, which echoes similar arguments found in other countries today.<sup>8</sup> Of course this argument reaches back to the very formation of the Comintern in 1919 and had already divided opinion from the earliest days of international Bolshevism.<sup>9</sup> The

debate drew significant contributions from former Communists such as Franz Borkenau, Fernando Claudin, Ante Ciliga, Milovan Djilas, Isaac Deutscher, Louis Fischer and Leon Trotsky himself – but it was inevitable that new sources, such as the Moscow archives, would attract researchers and that new evidence would be found to support competing interpretations.<sup>10</sup> Recent research has also paid attention to the national, regional and local supports of Communist politics. What it meant to be a Communist varied in important respects according to a multiplicity of factors, including the politics of the moment and the place where one was active. There was a world of difference between a relatively stable parliamentary democracy like Britain and the conditions of extreme repression in which Communists were active in South Africa or Nazi Germany. But there were also significant differences within British Communism between trade union activists and student members, men and women, those active in the 1920s and those who joined in the 1960s – to take only a few instances. Even the most subservient of Communist parties could only pursue the Moscow-approved tactics – in the days when the Comintern tried to micro-manage such things – in the conditions peculiar to particular countries and this often involved innovations and particular adaptations in accordance with calculations made locally. One can also find evidence of local motivations for the acceptance of a ‘general line’ imposed by the Comintern and Moscow leadership. Such is the case, for example, even in a moment of major miscalculation, as when the Comintern ruled that socialists and social democrats were simply enemies of the working class, to be shunned completely, as it insisted between 1928 and 1934.<sup>11</sup> Some British Communists had their own reasons for wanting a ‘left’ turn in 1926 and after, just as some of their German counterparts did in 1928.<sup>12</sup>

Another common strand in the current literature on Communism is an interest in biography. The end of the Soviet Union, the opening of party archives and the preparedness of individuals to openly discuss their Communist commitment has made this sort of work possible, not only in Britain. During the Comintern period the CPGB amassed around 500 short biographies of its members and many more were added in 1941–42. The practice was common to all Communist parties. In France the biographies compiled by the Communist Party of France (PCF) have been described as instruments of ‘an almost perfect system of surveillance’.<sup>13</sup> In the British

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case they were usually generated by attendance at party schools or in applications for party jobs, rather than for disciplinary purposes.

Academic interest in the individual activist is not new. Historians have always been interested in the mentality of an age or society and concern with the mentality of Communists has a long history of its own, giving rise to some of the earliest studies of the 'psycho-pathology' of inter-war political 'extremism' in Europe and the rise of what are often called 'political religions'. Cold War propaganda made productive use of such studies of the 'true believers', but the question of beliefs, values and attitudes was always of wider interest. The impact of the Communist parties on the mentality of Western workers – through, for example, the formation of political sub-cultures – was thought to be highly significant as recently as the 1970s.<sup>14</sup> Communists themselves, as well as former Communists, often talked as if there was a special Communist personality, and the party was obviously credited with the capacity to shape the beliefs of those it came into contact with. Eric Hobsbawm once referred to the peculiar 'temper' of Communists, at least in the Comintern years, while Annie Kriegel identified a Communist mentality.<sup>15</sup> Raphael Samuel's affectionate portrait of the *Lost World of British Communism* (originally published in *New Left Review*) likewise aimed to 'reconstitute a political mentality'. Samuel also showed the broader cultural significance of this lost world. By comparison with the present day, he argued, political formations generally aspired to monolithicity. They demanded exclusive loyalties and fervent supporters, suitably deferential to party leaders. But to be a Communist, he claimed, 'was to have a complete social identity, one which transcended the limits of class, gender and nationality'. 'We lived', according to Samuel, 'in a private world of our own ... a tight ... self-referential group', though 'we had far more in common with the national culture than we realized at the time'. Such commonalities included a shared patriarchal system of authority; conformism to rules; a mania for 'collective responsibility'; tolerance for bans, proscriptions and censorship; and the 'will to unity', which treated dissent as tantamount to treachery.<sup>16</sup> The study of the CPGB, if one accepts this argument or variants of it, opens a line of analysis of the broader socialist milieu, its values and assumptions, and offers a way in to an understanding of political activism, collective identities, the understanding of ideology, organisational cultures and so on.

For Samuel the Communist Party supplied philosophical certainty, belief in progress, selflessness, courage and consciousness of a world struggle centred on the fortunes of the Soviet Union. The military metaphor was insistent, the experience of being a Communist often made it real. The motivation – ‘to judge by some stray but suggestive evidence’ – was sometimes ‘a way of making *amends* for the hardships and indignities suffered by parents, a retrospective act of justice on behalf, or in the name, of those who had been less able to take up the fight’.<sup>17</sup> The party was conceived as an instrument of class struggle and revolution. Its decisions were binding, ‘irrespective of the means by which they had been arrived at’. There was no antagonism between centralism and democracy. There was no conceptual space even for private judgement. The point was to achieve disciplined efficiency in the prosecution of the struggle in order to drive the whole working class movement in the desired direction. All this was in sharp contrast to the CPGB of a later period. By the 1980s the world of Communism Samuel remembered from his youth in the 1940s was lost and in its place stood an organisation he hardly recognised as Communist at all.

In its early years the CPGB had almost a ‘cradle to the grave’ ambition for its membership and the ‘Communist life cycle’ began with mothercraft and childrearing and could end with perorations at the graveside of those of its stalwarts who had been ‘killed by capitalism’. This is a ‘complete party identity’ with a vengeance and the offspring of Communist parents remember it with every emotion from fond gratitude to deep resentment.<sup>18</sup> Thomas Linehan sees it as a type of political religion and draws on the experiences, recollections and commentaries of long-serving members to reconstruct the party’s social and cultural history in the inter-war years.<sup>19</sup> The model of the Soviet Union is everywhere, ‘beginning’ with practical advice on childrearing and mothercraft, leading to visions of both the home and family of the future. Its influence was channelled through Comintern-inspired structures such as the children’s organisations launched in 1924 and their monthly publication *The Young Comrade*. The Young Communist League (YCL) took responsibility for the children’s sections (ages 10–14) which became known as the Young Pioneers’ League in 1925 (renamed Young Comrades’ League in 1926), charged with the task of building nuclei in the schools. In February 1927 the CPGB launched *The Workers’ Child* to dispense advice on childrearing. In December 1931 the *Red Book*

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*Corner* was published to rival the standard Christmas children's annual. Other forays into children's publishing included *Our Lenin* and *Martin's Annual*, not to forget the work of Geoffrey Trease in such re-worked classics as *Bows Against the Barons* (1934), his socialist Robin Hood.

The YCL itself was originally conceived as a serious alternative to the youth organisations of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) which, according to YCL leaders, catered only for 'cultural faddists and intellectual idlers'. The YCL, by contrast, was supposed to fight for the rights of young workers in the factories. Linehan quotes one of its members, Margaret McCarthy, recalling 'the love and spiritual sympathy of comrade for comrade' and how the same young people in the late 1920s were 'dedicated to hatred, destruction of the old capitalist regime, sanguinary class war and apocalyptic revolution'.<sup>20</sup> But even at this moment of revolutionary purity the party changed its tune on the functions of the YCL. From 1927 a new emphasis on cultural pursuits – rambling, music, theatre – entered its profile, though the Third Period had nearly killed the organisation by the time it was 'liquidated' in 1930. It was re-started within months, however, and reached as many as 20,000 through the sales of its journal *Challenge* by 1938.

The Communist Party was 'saturated with married couples' and other family connections.<sup>21</sup> It made enormous demands of its members and endured an equally enormous turnover rate. Those who were married to non-members were encouraged to convert their spouse; those who couldn't often faced severe marital strains. The party recognised some of these stresses of membership and encouraged physical fitness and healthy diet. It infiltrated the British Workers' Sports Federation and was virtually running it from 1927. Again there was a Soviet inspiration – the Red Sport International founded by the Comintern in 1921. Lenin, it was said, swam, did daily gymnastics, enjoyed cycling and hiking and followed a strict dietary regime. The fact that he died prematurely, just fifty-three years old, was not allowed to interfere with his status as a model in these matters at a time when Communist iconography supplied the abiding image of Soviet man as muscular, athletic and indomitable. Lenin set the standard intellectually too and as a paragon of clean living, respectability, personal asceticism and moral propriety in the manner of all the dangerously 'pure' revolutionaries since Robespierre. The student of Communism has the opportunity to



study 'the true believer'; the nature of political commitment and political beliefs; the personal satisfactions, motivations and frustrations of activism; the remarkable history of an ideal that turned foul; the illusion of an epoch, the deceptions and self-deceptions that sustained it.

However, the idea of Communism as a political religion is not as clear-cut as it is often made to seem. The 'closed world' idea of the CPGB can also be misleading. Even Samuel acknowledged the shared aspects of the political culture of Communists and British society and it is easy to see parallels between the Communist mentality and those to be found in the broader Labour movement, with their mutual insistence on solidarity, militancy, organisation, unity, leadership, self-sacrifice and so on. Even Annie Kriegel and Harvey Klehr distinguished between an inner elite and ordinary members, who were something less than real Leninists, something short of the ideal.<sup>22</sup> The Communist parties recruited different people at different phases of their history. The motivation for joining was not necessarily the same in say 1936, as it was in 1966 or 1926. The demands of membership were not fixed and unalterable. And of course the variations between countries, in terms of what it meant to be a Communist, could be vast. The CPGB was always small and legal, without the extensive, self-contained sub-cultures and organisations of the PCF and the PCI (Communist Party of Italy), deprived of the great power resources that might have sustained the Comintern's early ambitions for it. The CPGB members came from labour movement backgrounds and felt at home in this milieu, though by the mid-1950s up to a third of recruits came from party families.<sup>23</sup> The numbers joining the CPGB were so small that whatever the social group one looks at, exceptional factors have to be invoked to explain recruitment. Prosopographical analysis can arguably isolate such factors. The typical member of the party was socialised in the older cultures of the left but combined that experience 'with a process of dissociation that was as likely to be social or geographical in character as political'.<sup>24</sup> Founding members of CPGB branches, for example, were disproportionately migrants with a history of labour movement activism in another part of the country. But '[w]hatever the differences in policy and ideology, compared with the larger body of people who never became active in politics, the CPGB in its social aspects was far closer to established models of labour movement activism than either the party or its detractors ever quite