

Piecing together the past: the Comintern, the CPA, and the archives

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The story of the Communist Party of Australia can be, and has been, told in various ways: official, personal, polemical and scholarly. Until now, archival collections that have borne on this story have been relatively inaccessible to the ordinary, interested reader. This book begins to redress that deficiency by making available a selection of documents from a larger collection, now publicly available. The selection focuses on the relationship between the CPA and the Communist International because the activities of the CPA are essentially incomprehensible without understanding the international communist context within which the CPA operated. That context was dominated by the newly-created Soviet state and its decision to authorize and utilize a network of communist parties throughout the world.

The documents in this work suggest three major propositions about the relationship between the CPA and the Comintern. First, that the Comintern was crucial in the formation of the CPA, via its emissaries, instructions and authority. Second, that the Comintern played a major role in directing the policies of the CPA in domestic matters (not to mention in international matters, where the Comintern's decisions were supreme). And third, that the leadership of the CPA was, from 1929 onwards, shaped, trained and authorized by the Comintern. There are two points that the evidence available to us does not sustain, though it does not mean that we should entirely exclude them: that Comintern money played a major role in the life of the CPA during the period we are examining; and that the CPA, under Comintern instruction, maintained an illegal or underground secretariat. Both these latter points have been persuasively argued and documented in the case of the Communist Party of the United States (Klehr, Haynes and Firsov 1995; Klehr, Haynes and Anderson 1998) and the Communist Party of Great Britain. The evidence of the documents we have examined suggests that funding of the CPA from Moscow took place, though its extent is impossible to quantify. It also suggests that there were no illegal operations of the sort encouraged by the Comintern, and engaged in by the CPUSA and to a lesser extent by the CPGB, and by many other communist parties. Australia became a much more interesting target for Soviet intelligence agencies from the middle of the Second World War, around the time of the disbanding of the Comintern in 1943. It is noteworthy, however, that Soviet agents used the CPA and its—by then functioning—network of illegal cells and covert members, but that is another story.

In this essay, I shall explore the origins, functions and development of the Comintern to explain its extraordinary ability to impose its will on its parties, and argue for the importance of archival contributions to deepening our understanding of its history. In the following essay, I shall provide an overview of the main features and turning points in the relationship between the CPA and the Comintern. Taken together, these essays provide a framework within which the documents can be contextualized and evaluated. I hope they will also encourage further work in this area.

The Comintern and the Soviet state

The Communist International, the Third International, or simply the 'Comintern' as it is most commonly known, came into existence in Moscow in 1919. It was established in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution of 25 October 1917 (Old Style; or 7 November 1917, in the Gregorian calendar, which the new regime soon adopted). The Comintern was the third in a series of groupings of international socialist and workers' parties, the first of which was established in 1864 in London. Karl Marx may have played an important ideological role in the International Working Men's Association, drafting one of its major documents, but it was a collection of workers' groups with diverse and divergent strategies. The Second International, much more firmly in the Marxist tradition, was established in 1889 and was guided at first by the aging survivor of the Marx-Engels partnership, Frederick Engels, and after his death in 1895 by Karl Kautsky, a leader of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), literary executor of the Marx and Engels manuscripts, and acknowledged 'Pope' of Social Democracy.

In its attempts to knit together socialist parties of the world and to give effect to Marx's declaration of the 1848 *Manifesto of the Communist Party*—'workers of all countries, unite!'—the Second International was a triumph of form over substance. It was a collection of socialists who had, as it turned out, rather diverse ideas about nationalism and their role in dealing with the (increasingly evident) national loyalties of the working class they purported to represent and lead. Furthermore, it was a *collection* of socialists rather than a centralized organization; indeed, it was criticized for being simply a 'mail box'. The Second International, already sullied in the eyes of radical socialists by the inconclusive debate over 'Revisionism' near the turn of the century and a general fuzziness about reform versus insurrection as the method of establishing socialism, was dealt a mortal blow in the same eyes in 1914 after the outbreak of the First World War. The major European socialist parties, especially the German and the French (that had dominated the International), supported their own national governments rather than opposing the 'imperialist war' and adopting an approach of 'revolutionary defeatism' as the radicals advocated.

In response to the perceived betrayal of the interests of the working class, radical socialists met a number of times during the war, notably at Zimmerwald and Kienthal in Switzerland, to establish the foundations of a response that was simultaneously socialist and internationalist. Lenin and Trotsky were part of this group. Lenin railed against the horrendous human cost of the war, and pressed into service the analysis of imperialism by the English liberal J.A. Hobson to declare that capitalism had entered its final stage, and would inevitably generate ever more destructive imperialist wars. Having taken power in war-weary Russia towards the end of 1917, the Bolsheviks eventually withdrew Russian forces from the war and signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, surrendering to the Germans half of Russia's industrial capacity and a third of its agricultural land. The treaty signalled an approach that would become much more evident in later years: that the Bolsheviks were prepared to compromise, adjust, or manoeuvre (depending on one's ideological predilections) to stay in power. In the end, the Comintern would also be sacrificed to this imperative.

Lenin and Trotsky, as the most prominent leaders and thinkers of the new regime, were internationalists. They believed that socialism in Russia alone could not survive, and that socialism itself would succeed only as an international phenomenon. Thus, Soviet Russia's best protection lay in exporting revolution to the world, and its best chance for the type of economic development they saw as required for socialism lay in leapfrogging Russia's backward economy with the assistance of advanced (socialist) countries (amongst which they invested their greatest hopes in Germany).

The mood of the times should not be underestimated. After the Bolshevik revolution, there were high hopes among many socialists—however much they knew about the Bolsheviks, and at first that was very little—and especially among the Bolsheviks themselves, that revolution would spread like wildfire. Russia would simply be the harbinger of the world revolution, and would be able to transfer leadership to more economically advanced socialist countries. At first the Bolsheviks seemed to be right, with a communist revolt breaking out in Germany in January 1919 (soon bloodily put down), and a communist government in Hungary in the first half of 1919. By 1920 the Red Army was in Poland, but was repulsed. But from the early 1920s, and especially after Lenin's death at the beginning of 1924, the Bolsheviks set about coming to terms with their condition as a proto-socialist state in a world of capitalist states.

The Bolsheviks took two major approaches to what they saw as their embattled isolation. The first was conventional, and consisted in the development of diplomatic and economic ties with other countries. However, given Bolshevik rhetoric about their mission of world revolution and implacable hostility to all capitalist states, normal relations with such states were understandably rather

difficult to establish and slow to deepen. The second, unconventional, approach consisted in the encouragement or development of communist parties in all the countries of the world, organized, and sometimes directed and financed, by Moscow, and also the development of a network of spies in the West to determine where and when the enemy would move against the Soviet Union. Trotsky, who played a major role in the formation and early development of the Comintern, called it the 'General Staff of the World Revolution'.

The American communists, for example, were enlisted in efforts to help lift the trade blockade of Soviet Russia, especially by holding public meetings (CALC, 515–1–36). The Soviet government signed a trade agreement with the British government in March 1921; yet despite the agreement's preamble proclaiming an end to propaganda for the overthrow of capitalism in Britain, the Soviets persisted in it through both the trade mission and the CPGB.

The role of the communist parties in this unconventional approach became increasingly instrumental and expedient, and—it must also be said—increasingly unimportant. From the 1930s onwards espionage became the more important aspect of the unconventional approach, conferences of the Comintern became less frequent, and eventually the Comintern was sacrificed to the Soviet alliance with the allied powers in the Second World War. Communist parties, of course, remained after the war, as did a popular but nebulous sense that they were working in the interests of the Soviet bloc (and, after its fracture, for either Moscow or Peking), but the coordination of their efforts was not as systematic or as overt as before. Furthermore, the Soviet Union had gained a measure of protection by its development of the atomic bomb and its East European buffer zone, and it had a measure of international recognition as a permanent member of the United Nations' Security Council, with the consequent right to veto Council decisions. Diplomatic recognition was no longer a problem, defence was managed by the nuclear stalemate, and spying became a regular industry for both sides in the Cold War.

The fear—perhaps paranoia—induced by capitalist encirclement had another, altogether more terrible, consequence within the Soviet Union. The notion that the world's first socialist state faced imminent attack from capitalism, a theme that permeated Comintern documents from about 1926 onwards, contributed in large part to the Soviet purges of the 1930s, during which millions were imprisoned or killed. New archival evidence makes it clear that despite the great mass of purge victims being ordinary people, and many having fallen victim by reason of the raising of bureaucratic quotas, foreigners and those with foreign forebears were singled out for particularly harsh treatment. Stalin feared that in a war against capitalism these would be the most 'unreliable' elements in Soviet Russia. Those with Polish or German connections, above all, were liquidated, whether they were communists, refugees, or simply those unlucky

enough to have been caught up in history (McLoughlin and McDermott 2003). Indeed, many foreign Comintern members residing in the USSR also became victims of the purges.

In 1919, these sad outcomes could not have been predicted. Communists from many parts of the world who happened to be in Moscow, or had run the Allied blockade, were in buoyant mood as the First Congress of the Third International was held. But they represented themselves more than parties or groups, and the organization proper should really be dated from its Second Congress in 1920. It was at the Second Congress that the Comintern began to take definite shape. Because of the numerous requests from various socialist groups to join it and become its national sections, a set of 'Twenty One Conditions' for affiliation to the Comintern was promulgated, and the issue of whether the organization would be a federation of equal parties or a centralized party was settled in favour of the latter.

The Comintern's organizational structure crystallized during the early 1920s, with the Russian delegation dominating the Executive Committee, and the day-to-day control being exercised by the 'Small Bureau', which became the Presidium of the ECCI. This too was dominated by Russians. In 1926 a new supreme body was created: the Political Secretariat of the ECCI, initially with eight members and three candidate members.

The Russians were effectively in charge, both by virtue of having Comintern headquarters based in Moscow, and by being the largest single bloc of votes on the Executive Committee. In the prevailing atmosphere approaching worship of the Bolsheviks and their revolutionary achievements, few thought through the consequences of this Bolshevization, and fewer openly challenged it. For those who did, there was always the possibility of expulsion. Lenin, in his *'Left-Wing' Communism—An infantile disorder*, reinforced the point that the Bolshevik style of organization with its democratic centralist arrangements was the only acceptable form of communist organization. (Trotsky, in 1903, had presciently described democratic centralism as inviting 'substitutionism': 'The party organisation at first substitutes itself for the party as a whole; then the Central Committee substitutes itself for the organisation; and finally a single 'dictator' substitutes himself for the Central Committee ...' (cited Deutscher 1970, 90)) As Lenin continued to insist, and as Trotsky eventually agreed, 'absolute centralisation and rigorous discipline in the proletariat are an essential condition of victory over the bourgeoisie' (Lenin 1976, 295). In the period from 1919 to 1923, then, the Russians achieved what McDermott and Agnew (1996, 14) called the 'universalisation of Bolshevism'.

The Comintern and its parties

If there were ever doubts about the centrality of the Comintern, its political and organizational predominance among, its financial subsidies to, and even its role in forming and accrediting the communist parties of the world, they arise both from the formal equality between communists and from the inability of some parties to carry out all of Moscow's directions. Formal equality, as the communists themselves have rightly pointed out in other connections, generally obscures real power relations; and, as much as Moscow demanded, sent emissaries, and hauled leaders of recalcitrant parties before inquiries, parties could not always do what they were told. Moscow made broad decisions—and sometimes even quite detailed decisions—about 'in-country' matters; it took sides in key internal debates and leadership disputes; it was often asked for advice. The Comintern sent an organizer, the American Herbert Moore, to reorganize the Australian party in 1930. But it did the same elsewhere. Bela Kun was sent in March 1921 as an ECCI emissary to Germany, where he provoked an insurrection and brought down disastrous repercussions on the German Communist Party. Otto Braun, having trained at the Frunze Military Academy in Moscow, was sent to China in 1932 as the Comintern's military adviser to the Chinese Communist Party, although the victory of Mao Zedong in 1935 as party leader was not the Comintern's preferred option (Braun 1982). Emissaries from Moscow were a common means of enforcing control (Lazitch 1966). Parties sometimes even asked for such assistance; in a confidential letter Israel Amter, an American communist delegate to the ECCI, wrote to the Presidium of the ECCI, on 30 May 1924: 'I would recommend that the Presidium without delay send to the U.S. one or more good Russian comrades ... both in view of a possible factional struggle in the Party, and in order to stiffen the backbone of the CEC and of the Party ...' (CALC, 515–1–273).

The relative weight between centre and periphery in the Comintern in particular cases is a matter of debate, but while the initial hope may have been for a partnership, the Comintern soon became an instrument of the Soviets. It may be too sharp a contrast, however, to say as Jacobson does that 'What was initiated as the organization of independent parties of revolutionary socialists ended as a manipulated tool of Soviet security interests' (Jacobson 1994, 32). E.H. Carr also supported this view, which relies on a rather too strict separation between the influence of Lenin and of Stalin. Carr argued that:

The slow process of 'Bolshevization' of foreign communist parties ... reached its logical conclusion with the consolidation of Stalin's dictatorship. By the end of 1929, long and often bitter struggles within the German, French, Polish, Czechoslovak, British and American parties had been ended by firm decisions of Comintern to cast its mantle over one of the contending factions, and by the

expulsion from the party, or removal from the leadership, of those who contested the decisions. (Carr 1982, 5)

Bolshevization took hold much earlier than Carr allowed; but it was perhaps less successful than he believed.

With the lull in revolution in the early 1920s, the terms of the Comintern agreement with its national sections came to be changed. There was much less hope for an immediate end to the Soviet Union's condition as the only socialist state. The Third Congress in 1921 declared that 'unconditional support of Soviet Russia remains ... the cardinal duty of Communists in all countries'. By the Comintern's Fourth Congress, near the end of 1922, proletarian internationalism chiefly meant support for the Soviet Union. By the Fifth Congress, after Lenin's death in 1924, 'socialism in one country' was the key issue. By 1926, the Soviet leadership was constantly warning about the threat of military attacks from the capitalist world. In the late 1920s, Soviet diplomat (and former People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs) Georgi Chicherin bravely, but accurately, told Stalin that talk about a foreign invasion of the Soviet Union at the time was 'ridiculous' (McDermott and Agnew 1996, 95). But fear of invasion was a theme in Comintern communications for the next 14 years, after which time the Soviet Union signed a thoroughly cynical 'nonaggression pact' with Germany, the only country that was likely to invade it (and, despite the pact, soon did).

The divisions between socialists were many, and not simply national. Lenin had some success in claiming the mantle of Marx prior to the Bolshevik Revolution, but even more success after it in the 'battle of the books' with Karl Kautsky (exemplified by Lenin's *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (1918)). In the end, Kautsky ceded the field, suggesting that if Lenin were a Marxist, and if Marxism meant dictatorship of the Bolshevik kind, that was something he didn't want to be. The grounds for Lenin's claims to be faithful to Marx in this area are thin (Lovell 1984, 164–81), but historical arguments are not always won with logic. Lenin's contributions to Marxism were distinguished by his hierarchical, professional and centralized notion of a revolutionary socialist party, his insurrectionary methods, and his insistence that the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' meant the rule of the communist party unrestricted by laws, even its own. His contributions fully justify the new label 'Marxism-Leninism', as a distinct theoretical current. Few people, even socialists, had heard of Lenin and Trotsky outside Europe before the First World War. They were unlikely to be aware of Lenin's extensive theoretical contributions when he burst onto the international stage in 1917, and were chiefly struck by the novelty of the creation of an avowedly socialist regime. Most socialists were amazed, sympathetic and even overjoyed, though many quickly became wary. Socialist parties throughout the world had to decide where they stood, and whether they sided with Lenin's regime and his views on socialism. If they did, the Communist International had

harsh news for them: form a unified communist party, learn Bolshevik lessons, and organize a revolution.

Throughout these introductory essays, and the book itself, I use the term 'Comintern' and 'Moscow' almost interchangeably. This raises the question of whether the line proposed by the Comintern's executive, the ECCI, was formulated or authorized by the leadership of the Russian Communist Party; so I shall address it here. There is some evidence that the relationship between the ECCI and the RCP changed, and that there were sometimes differences between the two, but ultimately nothing that the Comintern proposed as policy, through its Congresses or Executive Plenums, could be endorsed as policy without the sanction of the RCP, and later—especially after Stalin consolidated undisputed power in his own hands in Russia (perhaps around the time of the assassination of Sergei Kirov in 1934)—the Comintern simply echoed Stalin's views. The Russian party became so powerful within the Comintern 'that its delegation often decided among themselves not only which tactics and strategies the Comintern would pursue but who to remove from and appoint to the Central Committees of fraternal parties' (Chase 2001, 18).

The pre-eminence of Moscow was built into the organization of the Comintern. To challenge the Comintern meant, in most cases, to exclude oneself from the Comintern. Those who tried to change the Comintern from within—and only Trotsky and Bukharin ever really had a chance, for only a Bolshevik with outstanding revolutionary credentials could even hope to make an impact—were soon expelled, and their revolutionary credentials denied, as Trotsky himself had been expelled from the CPSU at the end of 1927 and openly slandered thereafter.

Congresses of the Comintern were held annually at first, but then became less frequent. At these congresses, the communist parties had rights to definite numbers of delegates, depending chiefly on their size. The party of the first rank, with the largest number of delegates, was the Russian. The Germans, French and Czechs were in the second rank. The CPUSA—well organized, but relatively ineffective—was entitled to about 20 delegates to Comintern Congresses by the end of the 1920s, which put it in the third rank of communist parties.

The communist parties were expected regularly to send details of their own operations, and of the political situations they faced, to the ECCI. Many parties, including the Australian, did so. The Americans, for example, sent minutes of most of their conventions and Central Committee plenum meetings and kept up a regular flow of correspondence and telegrams. The CPUSA kept in regular touch with Moscow, having a number of leading comrades at any one time in Moscow working for the Comintern, in the Lenin School, and at Comintern Congresses. The main 'line' for each communist party to follow, however, was decided in Moscow, sometimes (depending on the party involved) by members

of those parties based in or visiting Moscow before major congresses or meetings of their own parties. In a letter of 29 November 1935 to 'Dear Friends', 'Randolph' let the party know how it stood in Moscow and what the American comrades were being criticized for, but revealed much about the practical side of relations between the Comintern and its parties. In a section subtitled 'Organizational Questions', he wrote:

The greybeard who manages me has really followed our work very closely. He reads all the material carefully, and we have almost daily meetings on various questions ... [H]e pointed out that almost all our 'brati' are increasing their families considerably. Thus, he compared the Frogs [French], who, from March till now, have increased from forty odd thousand to about 75,000. (CALC, 515-1-3737)

The Comintern's role was as a 'general HQ', an arbiter of disputes, a setter of the political (and organizational) 'line' to be followed by member communist parties, a supporter and a punisher. This was a position which was easily and naturally accepted by most communist parties around the world. The disputes in which the Comintern intervened—or was asked to intervene—ranged from relatively trivial questions of personality to major questions of strategy, though trivial matters tended to be invested with a class significance beyond their real import, and strategic questions tended to display the hallmarks of personality clashes. And just as the Comintern could recognize affiliated parties, so it could abolish them: in 1937, the Comintern ordered the dissolution of the Communist Party of Poland, claiming infiltration by fascist agents.

The Comintern often overcame local communist opposition, or simply discounted local opinion, in drafting its decisions: to a large degree it was centrally driven. It may have had the assistance of national party officials to draft decisions for its sections, but they tended to be resident in Moscow for months if not years, and were likely to be detached from local conditions; they would thus have seen matters from the perspective of the centre and its imperatives. Yet the Comintern was not a monolith. Not everything done by the communists can be seen as being directed from Moscow (see Rees and Thorpe 1998). There is no doubt that there were disagreements and conflicts between the Comintern and some of its national sections. There were, for example, serious divisions between the Comintern agents in China and the Chinese Communist leadership more generally (Smith 2000). These would never be entirely resolved. Likewise, there were decisions taken by the Comintern that were not implemented, or only half-heartedly implemented, by some of these sections, taking advantage of ambiguity of expression, or distance in miles, from Moscow. But the Comintern always had the last word. It changed section leaderships, expelled some communist dissenters or made them undergo 'self-criticism' as a means of returning to good standing, and insisted on policies being implemented.

To be a communist meant to be affiliated to an officially recognized communist party; such recognition could only be conferred by the Comintern. The pre-eminence of the Russian party, and the generally recognized primary need for all communists to support the continued existence of the Soviet Union—that too was a condition *sine qua non* of being a communist at the time—meant that the parties of the Comintern could be put to use by the Russians to advance the interests of the Soviet state. Communists would not have put it in these terms, nor probably even thought of it in these terms. For them, supporting the Soviet state was a concomitant duty of support for the (world) working class; there was little sense of nationalism, or national betrayal, in making this connection. Communists supported the international working class, whose bastion was the USSR, and their hostility was directed against their own ‘bourgeois’ governments, who manipulated the working class daily. In their eyes, this was not a national struggle, but a class struggle. Many Russians, however, and especially the Soviet leadership, came to see it otherwise, and to see the defence of Russia, not the international working class, as the main point. This view culminated in Stalin’s appeal to his people to save the Russian motherland (after he recovered from the shock of the German invasion in June 1941), and in the official Soviet view of the conflict of 1941–45 as the ‘Great Patriotic War’. There are strong grounds for believing that the Soviet Union survived the German invasion because its own people fought for *Russia*, not for communism or the Soviet state.

Benefits and risks of Comintern affiliation

During the period examined by this book, the CPA was—for most practical purposes—marginal to Australian political and social life. Despite the terrible hardships of the Depression years, especially its worst years from late 1929 to late 1932 when unemployment peaked at 28% (Schedvin 1970, 47), it struggled to gain a membership of more than a couple of thousand dedicated communists and perhaps a few thousand sympathizers. While its leadership remained fairly constant throughout the 1930s, there seems to have been a high membership turnover; such was also the case in the CPUSA, the CPGB and other parties (Borkenau 1962, 367–70), where membership re-subscription campaigns became public relations embarrassments. The CPA, understandably for a small but highly articulate and motivated group, put a particular emphasis on strategic gains, especially on winning leadership positions in trade unions; in that aim it had some success. Union politics, however, are sometimes corrupt, and communists could also play this game. The showcase communist and Ironworkers’ Association leader, Ernie Thornton, was eventually dethroned by the legal actions of a former Trotskyist, Laurie Short in the 1940s, after Thornton’s methods were finally exposed (Short 1992).

Yet despite my assessment of its marginality, the CPA was also part of a worldwide, organized communist movement centred on, and encouraged by,

another state, the USSR, lending it the aura of a serious threat to the established order. The CPA loomed larger in government calculations, and larger in the public imagination than its size and activities warranted, precisely because of its Soviet connections. The communists and the government believed that they were involved in mortal combat. It is easy, in retrospect, to belittle both sides and their conceptions of what they represented. Australian communists were only one influence in the trade union movement, and were far less influential in politics and society. Politically, the charge of communism soon became a potent negative factor, and the Australian Labor Party paid dearly for the association of any type of socialism with communism.

Members of the CPA were well aware that their close relationship with Moscow was interpreted by their political enemies as subservience, and that this could be, as indeed it was, used against them in political debate. In a 1927 article on 'Politics and Publicity', the Sydney-based philosopher and communist sympathizer Professor John Anderson described the daily press version of communism as follows: 'Communism is a criminal conspiracy, conducted under "orders from Moscow"'. The phrase itself was commonplace. The issues it raised were broached directly by communists themselves on a number of occasions, but especially in a report to the CPA conference by a representative who had attended the Comintern's Sixth Congress (see Document 53). Esmonde Higgins here explained the situation in a way that would have seemed perfectly fair to communists, given their understanding of the united struggle they faced and Russia's demonstrated leadership in it, but which allowed a much more cynical interpretation. On balance, the latter interpretation is better founded.

The control exerted by the CPSU over foreign communist parties was something that communists—in Australia and elsewhere—were keen to deny. Lance Sharkey, General Secretary of the Party, in his 1947 pamphlet *Australian communists and Soviet Russia* put the official view: that the CPA had never had relations with the Soviet Government, since the Comintern itself had no relation to the Soviet government. It was a necessary fiction, required to deny that the CPA was the agent of a foreign power. But it had always been a difficult fiction to maintain, given that Soviet diplomats often had Comintern connections, and that CPSU leaders sat on the ECCI.

The tone of the contacts between the Comintern and the CPA, and its other parties, was generally demanding, and suggests a relationship of superiority and command. Even, or perhaps especially, in its secret messages to its sections, the Comintern language is predominantly 'instruct' and 'must', and only occasionally 'propose' or 'request'. We shall see that the Comintern took a direct role in the major change of leadership in the CPA in 1929. But in February 1931, the following coded message was sent to Harry Pollitt of the CPGB in reference to one Comrade Horner: 'consider you sanction expelling him from Party

Secretariat' (PRO HW/17/71). It is doubtful that major leadership changes could be made by the 1930s without consultation with Moscow, and sometimes they were made at Moscow's behest.

Thorpe has examined in the British case the question which logically arises: whether the CPGB was essentially a tool of the Soviet government. Communist parties were deeply linked to Moscow, by virtue of their regular contacts, financial support, and the echoing of Moscow's positions, but they were not simply its servants. Thorpe argues that the truth is somewhere in the middle, and that although 'it would be foolish to argue that the CPGB was autonomous of, and still less independent' from the Comintern, 'it would be equally fallacious to see it simply as a tool of Moscow without a significant life of its own' (Thorpe 2000, 282). Much the same can be said of the CPA.

As with other communist parties, the CPA's connections with the Comintern and its wholehearted support for the Soviet Union were a double-edged sword. In some respects, and earlier rather than later, it gave the party enormous prestige and appeal. It sustained the party with moral, and unquantifiable financial, support. On the whole, however, the connection was a liability: the Party's ideological conformity with Moscow made its policies at times out of touch with the concerns of ordinary workers; and its clear praise for the workers' paradise of the USSR did not ring true to most workers, for the jaundiced accounts of the USSR given in the capitalist press were essentially correct. J.B. Miles' Political Report to the CPA's Eleventh Congress in 1935 is typical of the CPA's approach:

I want to say a word about the Soviet Union. I have given a lot of attention to developments over there in the past. My study of the position recently reveals astounding progress. I feel enthused, I feel amazed, I feel happy, when I read about the reports to the XVIIth Congress. It is necessary that we give a good deal of time to popularise the achievements of the Soviet Union ... this is part of our work towards destroying capitalism in Australia ... We go before the workers full of confidence that the Soviet Union is a living example which can be followed by the toiling masses in Australia. (CAML 495-94-123)

The success of political ideas is sometimes related to whether they can be 'naturalized'. Jean Jaurès, for example, was highly successful in naturalizing socialism into the republican tradition in France (Lovell 1994). But communism was often seen as a 'Russian' idea; praise of the Soviet Union reinforced the stubbornness of this view. Indeed, there was little attempt to link communism to national traditions until communists had seen the success of fascists in doing so. From the mid-1930s, many communist parties made this an explicit part of their pitch to workers. The ninth Convention of the CPUSA (24-28 June 1936) had as its main slogan 'Communism is the 20th Century Americanism' (CALC 515-1-3964). Richard Dixon similarly declared to the Australian Party's Central Committee that 'We are the real Australians, the inheritors of everything that

is good and decent in the history of Australia' (cited Macintyre 1998, 317). The claim was not widely accepted.

However valid the political issues raised by the CPA—and issues related to living standards, restrictive immigration, and the future of Aboriginal Australians were very important indeed—the Party was burdened, and the issues tainted, by the charge that they were simply doing Moscow's bidding. The CPA objected to the 'White Australia' policy championed by the major established parties, and it drew attention to the mistreatment of Aborigines. For the rest, however, its policies for Australian workers were far in advance of what was permitted in the USSR, and foreign communists visiting the USSR (including Australians) sometimes expressed—almost always in private—their disgust at unsafe, dirty and inappropriate working conditions in Soviet factories. Unable to influence Australia's political agenda, the CPA could act neither to extend the revolution to Australia, nor to influence Australian foreign policy in the Soviet Union's favour.

The decline and demise of the Comintern

There is an important sense in which, after about 1927, the Comintern became marginal both because it had ceased to organize world revolution and because it no longer served Soviet foreign policy very effectively. Communist parties may have had some minor successes as another arm of Soviet diplomacy, but the Soviet government, like governments everywhere, soon realized that government-to-government dealings were effectual ways to conduct business, and that popular movements, mass or otherwise, were not. E.H. Carr saw the 1935 Franco-Soviet pact as a turning-point, in that Moscow had begun to rely for its security on traditional means, not its network of foreign parties. Moscow would also learn later to its cost that communists who took power elsewhere were not always under its control, and could even establish alternative centres of gravity for communists around the world.

The particular failures, and the overall failure, of the Comintern must also be noted. The centralized control of communist strategy by Moscow led to some terrible setbacks, as in China in 1927 when the 'united front from above' was short-circuited by Kuomintang expulsion and then massacres of Chinese communists (Pontsov 1999), or in Germany in 1933 when the doctrine of 'social fascism' had communists fighting the German Social Democrats instead of Hitler, or in the Spanish civil war of 1936–39, when the Soviet People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) under the leadership of 'adviser' Aleksandr Orlov, weakened the republican effort by murdering non-communist socialists and anarchists (Beevor 2006, 286–293, 300–306, 478). In addition, the communist parties failed to be seen as a major alternative during one of world capitalism's greatest trials, the Great Depression, which lasted for much of the 1930s in its heartland, the United States. Communist parties in most of the industrialized

world remained politically marginal, and their entry into 'popular front' (i.e., anti-fascist) alliances had more to do with defending the Soviet Union than advancing the socialist revolution.

In a crucial respect, the failure of the Comintern and its national sections is not so surprising. Given their connections to the Soviet Union, these sections followed the line of the Soviet Communist Party as it successively repudiated Trotskyism, Zinovievism, and Bukharinism and made Stalin's position as leader virtually impregnable. The Russian style of debate and denunciation was generalized across the communist movement, raising barriers between workers and communists. Good, talented communists were hounded out of the movement for one 'deviation' or another, until national leaderships looked to Moscow before they made any significant move. (A telegram of March 1930 from Australia asks: 'DOES EKKI DENDORSE [sic] PRESENT CEC APPOINTED CONFERENCE ADVISE SIGNED BARRAS LOUGHRAN DOCKER SIMPSON SHARKEY WALKER SHEILEY (sic) ISAACS MOXON' (CAML 495-4-17).) It was harder to kill deviationists outside Russia, but GPU agents seemed to have succeeded in the case of some prominent Trotskyists. All this was described under the euphemism 'iron discipline'. The fortunes of the Soviet Union also involved the image of life in Russia. And though communists worked hard to convey the image of happy, prosperous Russians (and even fooled some non-communist visitors, including the Webbs, with modern-day 'Potemkin villages'), there was enough unadorned truth about Russia to ensure that workers in industrialized countries did not find it an attractive prospect. At a time when the Soviets should have been winning the propaganda war, during the capitalist economic crisis of the 1930s, they were hampered by problems in their own industrialization efforts. As one sympathetic economist, Alec Nove, explained, the year 1933 in the Soviet Union 'was the culmination of the most precipitous peacetime decline in living standards known in recorded history' (Nove 1972, 207), when workers' real earnings represented one-tenth of what they had been in 1926/27. 'Bourgeois propaganda' at the time—hysterical though it often was—probably didn't know the half of it.

One of the systemic problems of the Comintern was its attempt to parcel world development into overarching formulae. The most disastrous of these arose from the Sixth Congress in 1928, which declared the advent of the 'third period of the general crisis of world capitalism'. This included the notion that the 'third period' would 'inevitably give rise to a fresh era of imperialist wars among the imperialist States themselves; wars of the imperialist States against the USSR; wars of national liberation against imperialism; wars of imperialist intervention and gigantic class battles' (Degras 1960, 456). This is a period in which all the antagonisms of capitalism would be accentuated, leading to 'the most severe intensification of the general capitalist crisis' (457). Therefore, the 'main danger' to the communist parties, so the argument went, was the danger

of 'Right opportunism', which soon included Trotskyism. The Comintern was used extensively for the campaign against Trotskyism in the international parties, essentially an attempt to root out any opposition to the leadership of the Russian Communist Party. In Russia, that could be achieved by purges, prisons and murder; elsewhere, it had to be done by 'argument' and expulsion.

The disputes within and ultimately the struggle for control over the Russian Communist Party found their echoes and parallels in the Comintern. Opposition was removed from within the Russian party first, and then elsewhere. All of this was done via the language of theoretical debate in which Lenin had earlier specialized, and there was—in hindsight—a bizarre quality to debates about theoretical positions which could mean the difference literally between life and death and which, after being used to defeat one set of opponents, could be discarded for a new position. The text obscured the pretext. Very few outside the inner circles of the ECCI could have known how this game was being played, even if they had inklings or concerns. Those parties remote from Moscow—including the Australians—were in this respect not much worse off than those closer. Delegates to the Sixth and Seventh Comintern Congresses began to understand, and were forced to take sides in, the Russian disputes. Local issues were taken up if they were grist to the larger Comintern mill. The highest virtue of communists was not independence of spirit and critical thought, but loyalty. Stalin made it very clear to the Americans in 1928 that, if they believed they could persist in their view of 'American exceptionalism' in spite of the Comintern, they would find they had no support when they got home (McDermott and Agnew 1996, 90–94).

The Communist International was dissolved by Stalin in 1943, as a concession to the other Allied powers and a gesture of good faith in their unity and mutual non-interference. Its life had been drained away since the Seventh Congress in 1935, when 76 member parties had met; there had been no subsequent congresses, and no major session of the ECCI. The Comintern had become largely redundant in the calculations of Stalin, who had not even attended the 1935 Congress. The Resolution of the Presidium of the ECCI proposing the dissolution of the Comintern of 15 May 1943 declared that the organizational form of the Comintern had 'outlived itself' (Claudin 1975, 40–43). After the Second World War the 'Cominform' was established, but the functions of the Comintern were delegated to the Department of Foreign Policy of the Central Committee of the CPSU. The work of directing the world's communist parties from Moscow went on much as before, though under different official auspices, and soon under very different conditions. The Chinese Communist Party under Mao Zedong took power in 1949, and chafed under Soviet direction until a final rupture between the two powers in 1963. In addition, the 1956 'revelations' about Stalin's errors made the loyalty of many individual communists and some communist parties themselves conditional.

What has added to the Comintern's aura is the importance which one of its founders, Trotsky, accorded it in his (already doomed) struggle for leadership of the Russian Communist Party in the mid-1920s, and his subsequent struggle for moral and organizational leadership of the international communist movement after he was expelled from the USSR in 1929. Trotsky continued the illusion that the Comintern was important, with his incisive analyses of communist failures in China, Germany, and Spain. To believe that had the Comintern followed Trotsky's policies in these events the outcomes would have been fundamentally different seems heroic, though in a strict sense it is unknowable. Trotsky further reinforced the myth of the importance of the international communist movement with his founding of the 'Fourth International' in September 1938.

The conspiracy view of history assumes that there is a plan to be implemented. The Comintern, even on a casual view of its decisions over the 23 years of its existence, had no such 'plan'. Its positions veered wildly from one extreme to another. Even if the formalized periodization of modern history into 'First', 'Second, and 'Third' periods by which it justified some of these swings is accepted—and that seemed absurd even to some communist critics at the time, including Trotsky—we nevertheless need to acknowledge that the Comintern was primarily *reactive* to events, and that much of the time it did not really know what should be done to advance its goal of world revolution. What became a substitute, of course, was the *raison d'état* of the Soviet Union. The Comintern's confusion seems apparent, for example, in some of the letters between Stalin and Comintern Secretary-General Dimitrov in the 1930s, in contradictory views on the proper approach in Spain (Dallin and Firsov 2000, 71–73), in the attempts to recreate the alliance between Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese Communist Party (106), and in Stalin's generally low regard for the Comintern and its national sections. To see the Comintern as having a logical policy-making process is to mistake its propaganda image for reality. Yet whatever he thought of the value of the Comintern—and there are good reasons for believing he did not think highly of it—Stalin nevertheless wanted it under his control. Dallin and Firsov (2000) show that from the mid-1930s, at least, the Comintern was totally subordinated to Stalin's will.

Archival contributions to the history of communism

History—not the march of 'one damn thing after another', as Churchill is reputed to have said, but the selection, arrangement and construction of a narrative from the apparent confusion of events; history as the creative task in which historians are engaged—can be a highly contentious matter. Even where 'the facts' have been established (sometimes a difficult process in itself, notwithstanding an argument about whether facts may ever be separated from interpretation),

historians may disagree over their relative importance, or may choose to highlight some facts over others to propose a particular case.

The history of communism as a whole spans roughly what Eric Hobsbawm (1994) described as the 'short' twentieth century: 1914–1991. It is a particularly contentious history both because communism was a political ideology and movement that took definite stands and divided communities, and because communists were often secretive about their activities and organizations. The cause of this secrecy (whether, for example, it was out of self-defence as the communists sometimes insisted, or for fear of losing support as their critics would argue) need not detain us here. But because communism is, in effect, now dead, some of this secrecy can be lifted. Making available the archives of the Comintern is an important step in this process.

The Comintern was intended by its founders as the world party of socialist revolution. Its sections, the communist parties of many countries around the world, were authorized as 'communist' by the Comintern, and in return for this recognition (the authority it bestowed upon them, and the subsidies from Moscow it usually entailed) they proclaimed their support for, and attempted to implement, the various decisions made by Comintern congresses and by its Executive Committee. The Comintern was both keenly aware of its 'world-historical' role, and highly bureaucratic in its structure and habits. Consequently, it collected and filed extensive records of its own meetings, correspondence with its sections, and records of their meetings (congresses, central committee meetings, central control commission meetings, and sometimes even local branch meetings).

After the Comintern's demise in 1943, its records were stored in an archive that by late 1991 had come to be called the Russian Centre for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Recent History (RTsKhIDNI). The failed Communist Party coup in Moscow in 1991 and the subsequent seizure by the Russian government of the property of the CPSU, including the archive, enabled these records to be put into the public domain. Since 1999 the RTsKhIDNI has become the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI). RGASPI has been cooperating with scholars, libraries and publishing houses around the world in disseminating much of this material, which contains records of many communist parties, and amounts to perhaps 20 million documents. The major products of this initiative so far have included: a number of volumes in a projected multi-volume series entitled 'Annals of Communism' published by Yale University Press; the deposit of the very extensive archive of the Communist Party of the USA in the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, which was opened to the public in 2000; and the current issuing, by RGASPI and the microfilm publisher IDC, of the Comintern archives on nearly 12,000 microfiches.

The Comintern Archive at the ADFA Library (CAAL), on microfilm, is also part of this process of making the Comintern archives more accessible.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Australian communist leaders went to Moscow to attend Comintern conferences and report on the prospects for revolution in Australia. The CPA submitted reports on its conferences and Central Committee meetings to the ECCI and the Anglo-American Secretariat. Local leadership disputes were referred to Moscow, and a great deal of advice and some 'orders' came the other way. On all these matters CAAL has much to tell us. It reminds us, in particular, of the difficulties of communicating over such long distances in the days before faxes, email and jumbo jets. Australians were stationed in Moscow for varying periods of time (often on their way to conferences or at the Lenin School), but because of the length of time away from Australia their usefulness in reporting on party matters, or helping Comintern leaders to resolve antipodean disputes that were put before them—sometimes by telegram—was limited. The Comintern, for its part, sent occasional representatives to Australia and New Zealand, the most significant of whom (Herbert Moore) stayed for over a year to reorganize the CPA.

All the Comintern's archives are organized in a series of collections and stored in folders, with individual designations based on a triple classification of *fond*, *opis*, and *delo*. The separate collections (*fondy*), and sub-collections, or inventories (*opisi*) are numbered. Within the sub-collections are numerous (sometimes hundreds of) *dela*, translated as 'files' or 'folders'. Some *dela* contain only a few pages, others contain several hundred. Many of the documents are in English, with Russian (and other) translations. Many deal with routine matters, or are drafts of documents finally (and sometimes publicly) proclaimed. Some documents are repeated. Some documents are designated 'Secret', 'Most Secret', or 'Confidential', though it is not easy to see in all cases why such a designation was made. The coverage can also be patchy. In general, records in CAAL from the earlier period (especially the 1920s) are fuller than those from the 1930s; towards the end of the 1930s there is not much available. If this is the case in the materials dealing with Australia, it is also the case in materials we have examined in Washington, DC, concerning the Communist Party of the USA. A key difference between the two archives, apart from the massive size of the CPUSA Archive, is that there is little in CAAL from individual branches of the CPA. None of these observations diminishes the fact that CAAL provides a new avenue to explore the early history of the CPA (and not just its relations with Moscow, on which the selections in this work focus), but they do demonstrate the need to draw on diverse types of source materials in studying the complex and multi-dimensional story of the early CPA.

The documents in CAAL encompass and extend the archival material from the Comintern already available at the Mitchell Library in Sydney, brought to

Australia in 1990 by Barbara Curthoys. The additional material in CAAL includes directives from Moscow in 1926–27, materials on the internal situation of the party (which was, at times, unsettled), Comintern resolutions on the ‘Australian question’, and early correspondence about the formation of the CPA. There is a further 250 pages from the period 1948–52 (postdating the end of the Comintern) on the CPA and youth organizations in Australia. Large though the CAAL collection may be, it does not seem to be complete; some documents, for example, refer to others that cannot be found, or to attachments that are missing.

The CAAL documents supplement existing archival materials on the CPA available in the Normington-Rawling Collection held at the Noel Butlin Archive Centre at The Australian National University, and other collections described elsewhere (Symons, Wells and Macintyre 1994; Symons 2002). The Oral History project stored at the National Library of Australia in Canberra also provides valuable materials for reconstructing the early period of Australian communism from reminiscences of CPA leaders and members. We are sure that as further Comintern documents come to light the story of the CPA will gain even more interest and complexity.

It may be appealing to agitate for ‘archival parity’, and to insist that we should not use the Soviet archives until all the Western archives for a similar period are available. But all history must be constructed on the evidence available, and the evidence is rarely, if ever, complete. Historical writing is thus intrinsically selective. The essential ingredient is good judgement in the use of available evidence: something that is fundamental to the way we do our work as scholars. We have been selective in this work, but not in order to support some preconceived opinions. Our selections have been representative of the material in the archive that sheds light on the relations between the Comintern and the CPA. Because the CAAL material is more extensive on the earlier period, for example, that is where our emphasis also lies.

Secrecy and misinformation were characteristic of all states during the Cold War, and can be explained in part as a consequence of that period of ‘hostilities’. But the secrecy of the communist system was systemic: there was no civil society to act as a countervailing power against the state, to question secrecy. Freedom of information legislation in many Western states has allowed some access to security files; government confrontation with security services has led to the destruction of many files; and the press is intermittently in hot pursuit of security scandals. The veil of secrecy in former communist states is being lifted both more gradually and less systematically, and it still takes considerable courage to reveal some communist secrets. Through the defectors Ken Alibek and Vasili Mitrokhin we have had some interesting glimpses. From the former we have discovered, for example, that despite signing a treaty in 1972 with the United States for banning bioweapons, the Soviets continued a secret and large program

of offensive biological warfare (Alibek 1999). From the latter, we have an idea of the extent of Soviet espionage in the West (Andrew and Mitrokhin 1999).

It should also be noted that Western archives provide an interesting perspective on communism during this period, with the Australian Archives providing—in the usual way—access to classified documents after 30 years. Here we learn of police and other surveillance over communists, and actions against them. On the highly secret matters of Cold War intelligence, some Western sources have become available in recent years, even on the World Wide Web. Some of the Venona decrypts which prove Soviet spying against Australia, Britain and the United States in the mid- to late-1940s, were published in 1995 (at www.nsa.gov/docs/venona/). Furthermore, decrypts of Comintern radio traffic to stations in Europe in the 1930s are now available at the Public Record Office in London (in their 'HW 17' series), giving a much better idea of the pattern of the Comintern's relations with its parties. In the United Kingdom, the archives of MI5, the Security Service branch of British state intelligence, are also being released to The National Archives, thus far covering the period up to 1957 (www.mi5.gov.uk/output/Page233.html).

The collapse of communism, and opening of some of its archives, gives us a better chance to see how Soviet communism worked internally (especially its surveillance operations), and how it conducted its foreign relations (directly with foreign governments, through its network of communist parties, and through 'front' organizations). It also gives us a chance to re-evaluate certain issues that have had to be left open until now because of inadequate evidence.

The communists were great bureaucratic collectors; little was discarded. KGB archives even contain those letters and poems—sent but never delivered—from political prisoners to Stalin, protesting their innocence. Much, therefore, can be found out about what happened in these systems from the archives. There was, of course, some attempt in the closing days of the East European communist regimes to destroy files that might incriminate serving state functionaries—especially in the former German Democratic Republic, which had extensive surveillance operations of both its own populations and elsewhere (Funder 2002)—but the scale of the archives was too great. What remains of these archives, and that seems to be the bulk of them, enables us to get a more accurate picture of a system where secrecy was paramount.

Opening the archives has meant a great deal more light being shed on particular parties. The practical difficulties of accessing Comintern documents in Moscow (Taylor 1993) have been reduced by the wider dissemination of parts of the RGASPI collection to various libraries elsewhere. Those documents that concern the CPUSA, lodged in the Library of Congress, have been examined and some published by Harvey Klehr and his colleagues through the 'Annals of Communism' series. Klehr's views about the US communists as 'creatures' of the

Soviet Union are strong but well documented. The opening of the RGASPI archives in particular has led to interesting contributions on the American Communist Party, already noted, on the British Communist Party (Thorpe 2000), on the Chinese Communist Party in the 1920s (Pontsov 1999; Smith 2000), and on the relationship between Dimitrov, last Secretary of the Comintern, and Stalin (Dallin and Firsov 2000). This book adds another part to this mosaic of new information, and its source material on microfilm is now available on open access at the ADEFA Library.

Not surprisingly, more information often means more disagreement. When *The Black Book of Communism*, which seeks to document the crimes of communism, was first published in French in 1997, it created a considerable stir in academic circles. Its appearance has been paralleled by further, and still inconclusive, debates between Robert Conquest and others about the number of deaths in the Soviet prison camps (the 'gulag' made known, and notorious, by Alexander Solzhenitsyn). In one respect at least the *Black Book* goes too far: it claims that 'All Communist parties, including the legally constituted ones in democratic countries, possessed a secret military wing that made occasional public appearances' (Courtois 1999, 282, 286). While this may have been true of West European communist parties, we can find no evidence of it in Australia (despite the semi-public presence of threatening right-wing militias, including the New Guard, in the early 1930s, and communist concern at that time about the imminent threat of illegality (495–94–95)).

While we have concentrated on throwing light on the relationship between the Comintern and the CPA in our search of the Comintern archives, our efforts do not exhaust all that may be gleaned from this source. There may be additional theses that suggest themselves in a perusal of all the documents, but we do not believe that our theses can be controverted by appeal to the entire archive. We have tried to be as fair as possible in our selections, and that fairness can be tested by consulting the archives themselves.

Conclusion

Like all Communist Parties, the CPA's history is anchored in developments in the international communist movement, with its campaigns, debates, and splits. A strong international connection defined from the very beginning what was new about the communist movement. Nevertheless, the relationship between the CPA and the Comintern, though vital, was not always an easy or straightforward one, as we shall see in the next essay. The CAAL documents show us that during the mid-1920s, for example, the CPA had a relative autonomy from the Comintern chiefly by virtue of poor communications. They also show that the CPA was poorly organized, small, and perhaps faltering, and the influence of the Comintern may have been decisive in its survival through this period. The CPA looked for and accepted the Comintern's advice, even if it could

not always successfully act on it. After 1929, however, there was a change in the relationship, brought about in part by changes in the Comintern's leadership, in the organization of the CPA itself, and by the installation of the Comintern's representative in the Party. The notion that Comintern instructions had to be obeyed became axiomatic.

The link between anti-capitalism and pro-Sovietism at first gave communists a *raison d'être* and a burst of enthusiasm, as they established communist parties throughout the world and bound themselves to the 21 conditions of the Communist International; it sustained many of them throughout their political careers; but it also caused them increasing problems as time wore on. The importance of the link is underlined by the fact that the most important dates for communists were generally those in the international communist calendar. In the West, the link became a political liability, with the fear that a communist victory would mean a Soviet-style (if not Soviet-dominated) regime. Communists were often commanded to support the policies of the Soviet state, irrespective of whether such support was politically appropriate in a given country, and even if it meant espionage. Anti-capitalism became subordinated to pro-Sovietism.

There are some things, however, that the CAAL documents cannot tell us. They are silent on the intensely personal side of the commitment that communists made to the cause of world revolution. We may catch glimpses of it, especially in reports of high membership turnover. But the decision to accept a 'line' from Moscow with which one disagreed, or to be economical with the truth in the interests of solidarity with Moscow, required a level of naïveté or self-deception that is hard to credit in long-term activists. Since the collapse of communism in 1989–91, it has become almost customary for Australian communists to present their membership of the Party as well meaning, and their experience as having a human richness of idealism, yearning and suffering (Inglis 1995; Smith 1985). But this approach tends to obscure the fact that it was their serious intention to make the most far-reaching social and political changes to liberal democracy based on a theory that was flawed, and that they held up as a model a regime that was systematically brutal and inhuman.

It does not much help to insist, as many former communists do, that they not only had good intentions, but were also committed and idealistic. This seems to be a comfort only to them. With regard to Australian communists, Eric Aarons urges us to 'appreciate the depth of their idealism and their commitment to their socialist dream' (Aarons 1993, 3). Bernie Taft asserts that the CPA 'had attracted some of the most idealistic and selfless people in our society' (Taft 1994, 305), while making a sharp distinction between the 'apparatchiks' and the exemplary character 'of tens of thousands of ordinary communists' (Taft 1994, 2). Ric Throssell makes a similar point about the novelist Katharine Susannah Prichard: 'My mother was proud of her dedication to the party but in everything she did

she had been self-sacrificing, loving, forgiving, indomitably courageous in her life-long commitment to socialism' (Throssell 1997, 365). Humphrey McQueen (1997, 184) declares that the 'vast majority' of communists in Australia 'were selfless, generous and decent'.

The jury is still out on whether the communist experiment was a historical detour for socialism and, if so, whether socialism has been so compromised that it will never recover. Meanwhile, we are left to ponder over the Party experience. John Sendy, who joined the CPA in 1942, asked: 'How then do good idealistic people become tyrants who will stop at nothing?' (Sendy 1997, 43). We can only wonder at the extent of Moscow's authority that it could turn strong, independently-minded people struggling for human dignity into its creatures: obeying every twist and turn from Moscow; abasing themselves in rituals of self-criticism; denying the plain truth. That experience, akin to a religious faith, is one of the fascinating sub-texts of the Comintern documents.