

The scope and limits of this book

This book is a documentary survey of the relationship between the Communist International and the Communist Party of Australia from the latter's origins until 1940, when the CPA was declared an illegal organization by the Australian government. It is intended to provide an insight into one very important aspect of the story of the CPA. It is not a history of the CPA. The various campaigns, conferences, personalities, and travails of the CPA during this period can be followed in their details elsewhere (notably in Davidson (1969) and Macintyre (1998)), though there are inevitably echoes of these dimensions here. This work as a whole supplements and extends the story of the CPA by focusing on its international commitments and how they influenced its work and its leadership. The introductory essays have set the larger scene within which these documents can be placed, and have drawn some general conclusions about the nature of the relationship between the CPA and the Comintern. At the head of each of the four documentary sections of the book that follow will be found brief introductions giving a sense of the context, issues, and key themes of the particular period.

The documents selected here tell only one part of a multi-faceted story. Given the limited material from local branch level in Australia, we are witness largely to a conversation between leaders and other 'insiders'. It is, in other words, an unavoidably 'top-down' view of this period in the CPA's history. It tends, therefore, to reflect the high-policy preoccupations of the leadership, and does not give much insight into local campaigns, successes and problems. How an ordinary CPA member would have experienced the Party's relationship with Moscow, from the material available here, can only be guessed at. In important respects, the national leadership was a buffer between the Comintern and the local branches, explaining a new policy line and its local ramifications to members, and parrying questions from the centre about whether or how successfully the new line was being implemented. Yet Party members seem to have been remarkably compliant to changes in the 'line' coming from Moscow; even the reversal in policy over the Nazis signalled by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact did not see large numbers leaving the Party, as it did in other countries (Macintyre 1998, 386).

This book could not include all the documents in the Comintern Archive at the ADFA Library from which it is drawn. There are simply too many documents, and many of those are mundane or repetitive. Many documents were circulated in all the primary languages of the Comintern: Russian, English, German and French. This collection represents less than 1% of the documents we have examined. How, then, did we choose? The first goal in our process of selection was to identify documents that illuminated the relationship between the

Comintern and the CPA. There are doubtless other documents yet to be uncovered in Moscow that may have a further bearing on the details of this account, but not the general outline. There may be other ways to select the documents, especially to shed light on different aspects of the early CPA; but our interest was in the relations between the Comintern and the CPA, because this was perhaps the most important relationship the early CPA had. Our second goal was that this collection should not include documents that are relatively easily accessible elsewhere, such as those that have previously been published by the CPA itself, for example its major conference resolutions.

The documents are organized into four main sections, on a chronological basis, covering first the early 1920s, then the mid-1920s, then the Great Depression and the bulk of the 1930s, and finally the period approaching the Second World War. These are periods of quite different length, and they do not fully correspond to the periodization usually given in works on the Comintern itself. There are generally five periods identified in most histories of the Comintern: from its origins in 1919 until 1921, when the prospect of imminent revolution spurred on the communists; from 1921 to 1928 when the Comintern adopted the policy of a 'united front' with other working class and socialist forces to deal with the apparent stabilization of capitalism; from 1928 to 1933, the time of the so-called 'third period', when capitalist crisis was once again thought imminent and other socialists became the main enemy ('social fascists'); from 1933 to 1939, after the victory of Nazism in Germany and General Franco in Spain, when communists sought alliances (and even the formation of coalition 'Popular Front' governments) against fascism; and 1939 to 1943, the final period when communist parties were pushed in all directions—first, against the 'imperialist war', then in support of the 'great patriotic war'—to support Soviet foreign policy aims.

The periodization adopted in this book, however, has emerged in the course of selecting and preparing the CAAL documents for publication. It seems to reflect better the dynamic of the relationship than a more traditional account would allow. In brief, the first section, to 1924, covers the period of forging the CPA, a process which involved an important, and perhaps decisive, Comintern contribution. This contribution was expressed as much in the authority and instructions of the Comintern, to which the squabbling groups of Australian communists appealed for recognition, as in the Comintern agents who liaised with them. Having finally united, the Australian communists in the period 1924–28, whence the second selection of documents comes, came close to collapse. They were disunited over policy (especially towards the Australian Labor Party), disorganized, and often disheartened. The Comintern may not have saved the Party during this period, but it seems to have helped stiffen its members' resolve to continue; it was a stern voice in the distance: sometimes supporting, sometimes instructing, and sometimes goading. The third section covers the period from

1929 to 1937, when the Party underwent a major leadership change (in 1929) with the support of Moscow, when it was reorganized by an agent Moscow sent to Australia—indeed, requested by the Australians—for the purpose, and when it began to ape the ‘line’ from Moscow. This approach culminated in the attitudes reflected in the documents of the fourth section, covering 1938–40, when subservience to Moscow’s orders overshadowed every other consideration. Subservience led to Communist support for the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Communist defeatism in the war against Hitler, and consequently to the CPA’s outlawing by the Australian government in 1940.