

## *The History of American Communism and Our Understanding of Stalinism*

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Bryan Palmer's discussion of US Communist historiography is certainly our most probing and ambitious to date.<sup>1</sup> Its value derives from Palmer's focus on the critical problem of Stalinism as a kind of Occam's razor with which to delineate and analyze the literature's various strands. This tool works better in some instances than in others, highlighting some neglected aspects of the research, while drawing our attention back to what is at stake politically in our debates over the broader meaning of this history in our world.

My quick reaction to Palmer's useful juxtaposition of New Left and, for want of a better terminology, New Anti-Communist historiography is that one of our most prominent Marxist historians has been rather hard on the former and rather easy on the latter. The key to understanding this, as with most of the essay, is the organizing principle of anti-Stalinism. Palmer is certainly correct in his assertion that the New Left scholarship, with which I am still happy to identify myself, has not sufficiently engaged the problem of Stalinism, and, given his own focus here, this helps to explain the depth of his criticism of it. But in the process of framing his discussion solely in these terms, he has missed some key elements in our current situation.

Palmer acknowledges that Communists "fought for much that was honorable and achieved not a little that was necessary and humane," and he notes numerous realms of life—labor and unemployment, racial and gender oppression, peace and anti-war campaigns, agrarian reforms, and cultural work—where Communists made such contributions. The list, which we might augment at some length at various levels, from the individual neighborhood and workplace to the international battlefield, has indeed gripped the attention of New Left historians—at times, perhaps to the neglect of the international movement's failures and crimes and the implications of those for the US party. But if this is true, Palmer's list has been largely ignored by the more recent anti-Communist interpreters, who have been preoccupied instead with instances of espionage, duplicity, and crime. What was the *experience* of rank and file Communists in this movement? Were they all Stalinists in Palmer's sense

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<sup>1</sup>Given the proliferation of such discussions recently, this is saying a great deal. For a recent critical assessment of the New Left scholarship that makes for an interesting comparison with Palmer's, see, John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, "The historiography of American Communism: an unsettled field," *Labour History Review*, 68 (April, 2003).

of the term by virtue of their joining the Party? What did it mean at the level of daily experience to be a Communist? Whatever their failures, New Left historians probably have come closer to this experience than recent, more conservative interpreters.

It is an important moment to be asking such questions, which a focus on Stalinism *per se* will not necessarily answer. The convergence of studies of Communist espionage with recent efforts to rehabilitate the aims and methods of Joseph McCarthy and other Red hunters strongly encourage an elision between Stalinist espionage and intrigue and all other elements of Communist activity. Since Party members were all part of the international Communist conspiracy, then perhaps McCarthy's methods and those of other Red hunters were justified. I draw a distinction between recent popular accounts and revisionist scholarly work by Harvey Klehr, John Haynes, and others. The New Anti-Communists have explained McCarthy's own activities in terms of a partisan Republican strategy, and they have noted the dubious methods he followed in pursuing his quarry, but they also emphasize that the Communist Party represented a serious threat to national security. In this context, documentation of espionage activities has provided conservative commentators with justification for the severe political repression the United States experienced in the postwar era and the 1950s. The search for incriminating documents in the rich collections of the Comintern, the Soviet Party, and the CPUSA has mushroomed into a growth industry, rationalizing in the process a particularly destructive era for political and cultural life in the USA.<sup>2</sup>

Ellen Schrecker has acknowledged the role of Party members in Soviet espionage, but argued that most Communists had nothing to do with this, that the American party as experienced by most members must still be viewed as a legitimate radical movement, that McCarthy's campaigns and other political repression had more to do with domestic politics than with national security, and that to the extent that the government did act against domestic radicals on such grounds, it did so without justification.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps Schrecker has not dealt adequately with the Party's Stalinism that helps to explain the popular support for strident anti-Communism through the early 1950s. But Schrecker does deal with the fit between Party policy positions and methods, many of these dictated by the Soviets, and its destruction at the hands of the government. This dynamic between the pronounced Stalinism of the postwar era and the

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<sup>2</sup>On espionage, see Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes and Fridrikh Iforevich Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Harvey Klehr and Ronald Radosh, *The Amerasia Spy Case: Prelude to McCarthyism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes and Kyrill M. Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), and for a reinterpretation of the McCarthy era in the light of the Russian archival material, John E. Haynes, *Red Menace or Red Scare? American Communism and Anticommunism in the Cold War Era* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996). See also Kevin Smant, "Joseph McCarthy and the historians," *Continuity* 26 (Spring, 2003).

<sup>3</sup>Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little Brown, 1998). See also, Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism*, second edition (Boston, NY: Bedford St Martins, 2002).

feasibility of government repression is one that I have emphasized in my own work.

A great deal is at stake here. The lesson drawn in the popular press from the revisionist work on the Communist Party and its espionage activities is unmistakable: the McCarthy phenomenon and a whole range of other government activities designed to suppress domestic dissent were justified on the grounds that the CPUSA simply represented the American arm of a Soviet machine that threatened American security.<sup>4</sup> Palmer would undoubtedly put the matter differently, but I mention it because his own take on all this is not clear. As in the broader discussion of the historiography, his sharpest criticism is reserved for New Left historians like Schrecker; his treatment of Klehr and Haynes seems to be more positive.

The opening of the former Soviet archives, and ready access to the CPUSA's own archives through the microfilm material now available at the Library of Congress, represent a vital opportunity to reconstruct Communism as it was experienced by thousands of Americans between the time of the Russian Revolution and World War II.<sup>5</sup> With the history of American Communism back in the news and the archival material available, historians have an unparalleled opportunity to enter the broader public discussion of Communism's meaning for Americans—but only if they are prepared to begin the laborious process of reconstructing this experience using the unusually rich archives, along with the useful methods of biography, community and workplace studies, and oral history.

Palmer's correlation between the political roots of the New Left historians and the particular methods they chose to investigate their subject is important. Conservative interpreters emphasize the political biases of these scholars. New Left historians *have* tended to be more sympathetic to the Communist Party and to diminish its Stalinist qualities. As a subspecies of the "new social history" of the 1970s and 1980s, however, the New Left research on US Communism also showed a marked predisposition toward oral history, community and factory studies, rank-and-file personnel, and the culture of American Communism. We have had plenty of discussion of the political proclivities of these scholars, very little on the implications of their *methods, subjects, and evidence*. Even Palmer does not go far enough in drawing out the implications of "history from the bottom, up" for the varieties of American Communism such historians were likely to find in the places they looked. It is possible to discern Stalinism at this local level and among the rank-and-file, but the particular approach that has characterized New Left histories has tended to

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<sup>4</sup>Ethan Bonner, "Witching hour: rethinking McCarthyism, if not McCarthy," *New York Times* (October 18, 1998), Section 4, pp. 1, 6 summarizes the scholarship and some of its effects in terms of a rehabilitation of McCarthy-era anti-Communism. By far the most popular account, of course, is Ann Coulter, *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Crown Forum, 2003), which relies heavily on the work by Haynes and Klehr and also includes numerous references to coverage of this issue in the popular press.

<sup>5</sup>On the CPUSA microfilm collection at the Library of Congress, see John Earl Haynes, "The American Communist Party records on microfilm," *Continuity*, 26 (Spring, 2003).

accentuate the practical, indigenous, and local. In the process, it has not pursued the implications of Stalinism for such local work.

As Palmer suggests, the particular political context in which the New Left historians wrote also helps to explain the emphasis on the indigenous quality of the movement. Draper, Coser and Howe, and other early anti-Communist historians of the Party emphasized Soviet domination to the exclusion of all other causative factors in its history; the explanation was always the same—orders from Moscow.<sup>6</sup> The New Left historians clearly underestimated when they did not disregard Stalinism, but in retrieving the experience of typical Communists, investing them with some measure of agency, and reconstructing Party work at the local level, they revised a very misleading view of American Communists as robots of Moscow, one that we seem to be returning to in the last few years.

Having provided a more nuanced reading of Theodore Draper, the patriarch of American Communist history, Palmer then turns away from what seems to me to be the mirror image of this phenomenon in the work of those who have followed him in the anti-Communist tradition of American Communist history, notably Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes. If the New Left historians have focused too much on the local, often neglecting the particular kind of political party within which rank-and-file Communists operated, then the new anti-Communist historiography has focused almost entirely on “orders from Moscow.” While the New Leftists chose themes—agitprop cultural work, union and strike organizing, unemployed organizing—that might provide a “usable past” for current activists, the New Anti-Communists have chosen their themes—espionage, subversion in government agencies, internal purges—that best exemplify the control of American Communists by their Soviet masters. In the first approach, we often get so much detail and nuance, so much emphasis on agency, that the broader context of a highly-centralized party operating in a highly-centralized international movement is often lost—Geoff Eley’s “history of communism with the Communism left out.”<sup>7</sup> In the second, we run the risk of equating the lives and activities of thousands of militants with national and international Communist bureaucracies, and missing entirely the experience of Communist activism, the vital role of Communists in local labor and community movements, the meaning of Communism in the broader context of working-class everyday life.

Jonathan Brent, editorial director of Yale University Press (where many of the studies on espionage have appeared in its “Annals of Communism”), identifies the crux of the problem: “On the one hand you have scholars

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<sup>6</sup>See Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: Viking Press, 1960) and Draper’s later polemical articles in the *New York Review of Books* cited by Palmer; Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).

<sup>7</sup>Geoff Eley, “International Communism in the heyday of Stalin,” *New Left Review*, 157 (January–February, 1986), 92. See also, Fraser Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States from the Depression to World War II* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 3–4; Theodore Draper, “The Popular Front revisited,” *New York Review of Books*, (May 30, 1985), 79–81.

showing that many members of the Communist Party were motivated by a legitimate desire to fight social injustice. But at the top of the party they were controlled by Moscow. How do you reconcile the two?"<sup>8</sup> The standoff throws into bold relief the issue of the new archival resources available to us and how these might be employed toward very different ends. Enormous resources have been expended over the past decade in documenting aspects of Communist espionage. The extremely rich and detailed district records of the CPUSA and the papers of the Comintern and Profintern might also be plumbed to reconstruct the everyday experience of Communism, the Communist Party "in action," but, so far at least, such a use of the documents remains rare. While there might be a greater market these days for studies of espionage, careful local studies employing district level minutes, memos, correspondence, committee reports, leaflets, shop papers, and other archival materials, supplemented by local and party press, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) files, and related union and community sources represent an unparalleled and largely unfulfilled opportunity to grasp the Communist Party as most participants and those around them experienced it—rather than the experience of bureaucrats in Moscow and New York.<sup>9</sup> Surely such studies would illuminate the question of whether and in what sense more typical Communist activists were "Stalinists." In a phrase, we need a new social history of American Communism and, so far at least, we are not getting it.

To date, we have two very different examples of such studies. Vernon Pedersen's book on the Maryland party, very broad in both geographic and chronological scope—an entire state organization over 50 years—is actually rather narrow in its analysis. Providing little systematic treatment of the Party's everyday organizational work, Pedersen confirms the New Anti-Communists' conclusion that the party's work was not about social justice but rather about the interests of the Soviet Union. He studies a state organization but focuses heavily on leadership, and shows a particular interest in the intersection between the local Party and subversion. Randi Jill Storch's intensive local study of a large, diverse Party organization with deep roots in a number of industries, unions, and communities around Chicago in the 1930s presents a very different view. Storch places the Communist activists in the broader context of working-class life and labor in the city and presents the Party as one part of a broader social movement, though she is careful to point out the particular problems posed by the Communists' party organization and methods. Indeed, she demonstrates both the strengths and weaknesses of such an organization, its internal tensions as well as its political achievements. If extreme discipline, centralization, and authoritarian control are taken as hallmarks of Stalinism, they are not easy to find on the South Side of Chicago, where Communists sometimes seemed to be doing not what the leadership told them to do but, rather, whatever worked. Interestingly, Storch focuses not on the Popular

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<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Ethan Bonner, "Witching hour," 6.

<sup>9</sup>See Randi Storch, "Moscow's archives and the new history of the Communist Party of the United States," *AHA Perspectives*, (October, 2000), 44–50.

Front, when the party was more open and flexible in its approach, but on the late 1920s and early 1930s, the so-called Third Period, when it was particularly sectarian. Nevertheless, she finds considerable initiative from the rank-and-file and neighborhood level leaders, sometimes in opposition to district and national leadership, and considerable cooperation between the local Communists and other activists in the unemployed, labor, African-American, and youth movements.<sup>10</sup>

If the local study of the Communist Party represents a particularly promising line of research largely ignored by the New Anti-Communists, and the international, Stalinist dimension of the phenomenon represents an element largely unexamined by the New Left studies, recent biographies represent a third sphere of analysis ignored by all scholars until quite recently. Palmer's own forthcoming biography of James Cannon will be particularly significant, not simply because Cannon represents our most important case of the transition from CP leader to anti-Stalinist left activist, but also because his rich papers and lifelong relationship with revolutionary Rose Karsner promises to open a badly neglected part of this story—the effects of revolutionary politics on one's personal life. A biographical approach makes it suitably difficult for us to see our subjects as political robots programmed to achieve particular ends, and encourages us to consider them rather as individuals, each with his or her own strengths and frailties—a human dimension that we ignore at the risk of misunderstanding actual American Communists. There is a subjective history of Communism that could tell us a great deal about the costs and perhaps also the attractions of Stalinism, but a strictly political reading of the phenomenon will not grasp it.<sup>11</sup>

Palmer is correct in arguing that Soviet manipulation of the CPUSA and Stalinization were not the same thing, but both were problems for Communists in the US. There is indeed a history to the degeneration of the American Party and it did take a decisive turn with the rise of Stalin. But its problems did not begin with the expulsion of Trotsky—or James Cannon. Bureaucratic intervention in radical projects in the US, some of them very promising, started at least as early as 1923, and the problem was clearly related to the Bolshevik model, or at least its application in the USA and elsewhere. The collapse of the Party's work in a broad labor party movement in the early 1920s presents an excellent example. Cannon, Foster, and a group of union-oriented Communists around them succeeded by the spring of 1923 in building an effective bloc of labor, farmer, and other activists representing an unusually broad political spectrum. When mainstream labor progressives warned that more time was needed to

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<sup>10</sup>Vernon L. Pedersen, *The Communist Party in Maryland, 1919–57* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001) and Randi Jill Storch, "Shades of Red: the Communist Party and Chicago's workers, 1929–1939" (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1998). My description here is based less on the dissertation and more on a draft book manuscript of the study.

<sup>11</sup>On the personal dimension in Communist history, see James R. Barrett, "Revolution and personal crisis: William Z. Foster and the American Communist personal narrative," *Labor History*, 43 (2002), 465–482. See also, Kathleen A. Brown and Elizabeth Faue, "Social bonds, sexual politics, and political community on the U.S. left, 1920s–1940s," *Left History*, 7 (2001), 7–43.

generate labor support at the national level, these Communists urged the party to honor these requests in the interests of holding the movement together. Instead, John Pepper, a recently inserted Hungarian Comintern operative, demanded not only an immediate national convention, but also an attack on the mainstream labor progressives. Cannon, Foster, and others resisted, understanding what was at stake, but the Party leadership went with Pepper, who appeared to have the Soviets' blessings. The result was a disastrous policy that isolated the Party and ended any prospect for a Communist role in such a national movement. It also facilitated attacks by conservative elements in the unions, which helps to explain how the Party lost the considerable influence Foster and his co-workers had generated through the programs of the Trade Union Education League.<sup>12</sup>

If the deformity of the American Party started before Stalin's rise, this does not mean, as Palmer seems to suggest, that the game was over by the late 1920s. Although Palmer criticizes Draper for not paying sufficient attention to contingent factors, the same might be said for Palmer's discussion of the Popular Front. This was *not* only a strategy dictated by the Comintern but rather, as Michael Denning and others have suggested, a broad political formation based on mass social democratic politics, of which the CPUSA was but one part. The strategy might have been formulated in Moscow largely in consideration of Soviet foreign policy aims, but the Popular Front in reality was shaped by numerous influences in the United States and it *evolved* over time, as did many of the Communists involved in Popular Front organizing. Stalin might have declared the most important aim to be defense of the Socialist Motherland, but activists in and outside the CP took it to be the development of mass industrial unions and a labor-based social democratic politics and culture.<sup>13</sup> In turn, their involvement in the mass union and unemployed organizing of the 1930s and anti-fascist military service in Spain and World War Two changed many of the activists of this generation. These experiences, which brought many Communists into the mainstream of American life for the first time, in contrast to the isolation they felt in the McCarthy era, are often cited in memoirs as the bases for a new and more democratic notion of the Communist Party in the mid-1950s. The struggle to distance the party from both Stalinism and the Leninist notion of a vanguard Party constituted the last great struggle in the Party's history. This defeat for the reform elements led to the party's ultimate demise as a viable political organization.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 135–141.

<sup>13</sup>Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Verso, 1996), 3–7; Barrett, *William Z. Foster*, 189–190.

<sup>14</sup>Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 1–34; Joseph Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis, 1943–1957* (Cambridge, MA: 1972), 224–237. On the leaders of the 1956–57 reform movement who had thrived in the Popular Front era and then experienced the isolation of the McCarthy era, see Maurice Isserman, "The 1956 generation: an alternative approach to the history of American Communism," *Radical America*, 14 (March–April, 1980), 43–51; Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis*, 225–228. Peggy Dennis, *Autobiography of an American Communist* (Westport, CT: L. Hill, 1977), 220–224.

There is no doubt that Soviet manipulation of the American Party, though never complete, I would argue, was far more pronounced and destructive from the time of Stalin's consolidation of power in the late 1920s than in the early 1920s, which Palmer identifies as the paragon of revolutionary leadership. But it is difficult to ignore earlier instances of Soviet intervention and manipulation. The tone in the transcripts and reports related to the deliberations of the Anglo-American Commission of 1925, for example, is surely not one of comradely equality. The problem was not one of Stalinism only; it also had to do with the implications of the vanguard model of socialist politics, a model that lent itself, as Palmer seems to acknowledge, to Stalin's rise.

This leaves us with an intriguing question for Palmer: was Draper correct after all? "Whatever has changed from time to time, one thing has never changed," Draper concluded more than 40 years ago—"the relationship of American Communism to Soviet Russia. This relationship has expressed itself in different ways, sometimes glaring and strident, sometimes masked and muted. But it has always been the determining factor, the vital element."<sup>15</sup> Perhaps everyone on both sides of this issue has been wasting a lot of ink. If not, what role do all these local and personal stories, what importance does the rank-and-file perspective have in Palmer's understanding of American Communism as an indigenous social movement, a genuine reflection of class conflict in the USA?

For all the crises that have preoccupied socialist historians for more than a decade now, I am no less sanguine than Bryan Palmer about the prospects for a resurgent socialist movement. Surely all the problems that might spawn such a movement are still with us, together with new ones that threaten the earth on a global scale. And I share his insistence that now more than ever such a movement must be internationalist in spirit and form. I am not expecting it to take the form of a new Comintern, however, but rather numerous independent movements that rise from the bottom, up. The tragedy of Communism in the United States came in its subordination to a powerful international vanguard, particularly with the rise of Stalinism. The realization of a new era of American radicalism depends on it maintaining an internationalist but independent course.

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<sup>15</sup>Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 5. See also, Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), xi, 415.



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