Industrial Militancy, Reform and the 1970s:
A Review of Recent Contributions to CPGB Historiography

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The historiography of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) has grown rapidly since its demise in 1991 and has created much debate for a Party seen as only of marginal interest during its actual existence. Since 1991, there have been four single volume histories of the Party, alongside the completion of the 'official' history published by Lawrence & Wishart and several other specialist studies, adding to a number of works that existed before the Party's collapse. In recent years, much of the debate on Communist Party historiography has centred on the Party and its relationship with the Soviet Union. This is an important area of research and debate as throughout the period from the Party's inception in 1920 to the dissolution of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1943 (and even beyond), the shadow of the Soviet Union stood over the CPGB. However an area that has been overlooked in comparison with the Party in the inter-war era is the transitional period when the CPGB went from being an influential part of the trade union movement to a Party that had been wrought by internal divisions, declining membership and a lowering industrial support base as well as threatened, alongside the entire left, by the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. This period of CPGB history, roughly from 1973 to 1979, was heavily influenced by the rise of Gramscism and Eurocommunism, in which a significant portion of the Party openly advocated reforms and a shift away from an emphasis of industrial militancy. It is a period that is important in CPGB historiography and has been overlooked in comparison with the lively debate seen over the CPGB's relationship with Moscow. The purpose of this article is to readdress the balance by examining what historians have written on the matter and how this fits into wider historiographical trends of the Party.

The issue of the CPGB and its relationship with the Soviet Union has been a contentious one throughout the Party's history and indeed highly debated within its historiography. The spectre of the Soviet Union over the domestic affairs of the

CPGB has been used by various historians and critics to account for the failure of the Communist Party in British politics with the heart of controversy centred around the Party's membership to the Comintern between 1921 and 1943, recently generating debate in Labour History Review.[1] Two articles on CPGB historiography have been written in the last six years and primarily deal with the Party's history up until the mass exodus of 1956.[2] Matthew Worley's *Reflections on Recent British Communist Party History* suggests that there has been a tendency in CPGB histories to be conducted 'from above'[3] and treat Communism as an anomaly to British politics, citing Francis Beckett's Enemy Within where 'the CPGB appears to be floating in a socio-political vacuum'.[4] For Worley, the 'traditional hierarchical perception' of CPGB history does little to examine the intricacies of the socio-political experiences of the Party's rank-and-file membership and the different aspects of Communist Party activism.[5]

On the other end is John McIlroy and Alan Campbell's *Histories of the British Communist Party: A User's Guide*, which traces the perception of the role of the Soviet Union on the Party's decision-making within CPGB historiography.[6] McIlroy and Campbell use Worley's historiographical article as an example of the trend 'which portrays CPGB politics as native radicalism and… suggestive of the party's political independence from Moscow'.[7] This shift away from a 'top down' historical examination of the Party's leadership towards a 'history from below' has opened up new areas of study neglected by a simplistic look at the Party's political structure. Although for McIlroy and Campbell, this 'revisionism' cannot obscure the 'real, often uncomfortable Russo-British world of what can never be reduced to a native, home-grown Communism'.[8] Andrew Thorpe, author of a major examination of the relationship between the CPGB and the Comintern, wrote that the Comintern policy was 'arguably the most important influences on British Communists', but the 'idea of a solid, unbreakable chain of command from Stalin's office in the Kremlin to the most minor CPGB member is not one that can be sustained'.[9] However, McIlroy and Campbell maintain that 'the Comintern was unarguably the most important influence' as domestic issues may have determined tactics, but 'they did not determine strategy'.[10]

It is understandable that this period has been debated at length and it will continue to figure largely in CPGB historiography, but it is not the purpose of this article to make any far-reaching conclusions on this subject. In comparison to the amount of work dedicated to the Party prior to the mass resignations of 1956-57, the period from the late 1950s until 1991 is underrepresented in Party historiography. Two significant works are the last two volumes of the 'official' history, continuing on from Party historians James Klugmann and Noreen Branson with John Callaghan's *Cold War, Crisis and Conflict*, which details the period from 1951 to 1968 and Geoff Andrews' *Endgames and New Times*, which covers the Party's final years from its post-1956 height in 1964 until the dissolution in 1991.[11] Alongside these 'official' histories have been several single volume histories by Willie Thompson, Francis Beckett, Keith Laybourn and Dylan Murphy and James Eaden and David Renton. This article will examine how these histories of the CPGB portray and analyse the transitional period of the CPGB from industrial militancy to the 'broad democratic alliance' and the rise of Gramscism/Eurocommunism.

Although Callaghan's volume concludes with the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1968, his coverage of the CPGB's post-war transformation under the programme of *The British Road to Socialism* is an important work for understanding the division between the traditional industrial militants and those who advocated wider reforms within the Party. Between the late 1940s and the mid-1970s, industrial militancy within the trade union movement was the main emphasis of CPGB strategy and policy, with particular importance placed by the Industrial Department on the election of Party members to the executive levels of the union machinery. While the period from 1968 to 1974 is generally regarded as the CPGB's 'Indian Summer',[12] Callaghan sees the peak period of the Party's industrial position as being in the mid-1950s when 22,503 of its 32,681 members belonged to a trade union.[13] With only 3,249 of a total 33,008 members in factory branches in 1963, this number continued to decline throughout the 1960s with only 2,576 members in factory branches in 1968.[14] In a more recent article on CPGB industrial policy, Callaghan has contended that during the period of heightened industrial militancy, the Party was under an 'illusion of influence',[15] where the weaknesses of the Party's industrial base and its rapidly declining factory membership was concealed by its emphasis on the wider industrial activism and its alliances with the non-Communist left in the unions. The Party's

Industrial Department, under the leadership of Industrial Organiser Bert Ramelson, had been instrumental in establishing the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions (LCDTU), which was at the forefront of the industrial action against the Wilson Government's Prices and Incomes Bill and the In Place of Strife white paper. While the Communist Party was able to gain some influence in the trade unions at executive level, it was unsuccessful in creating a 'national community of political branches' around which the party could decisively steer the labour movement, with the reality being a 'shallower, personalized network of trade union militants'.[16] The importance placed upon alliances with the non-Communist left in the unions meant that the Party's successes were through supporting wider industrial action, rather than initiating it, which lead to immediate defensive victories for the labour movement, but did not establish any radical alternative to the Labour left. As Dave Cook, the Party's National Organiser between 1975 and 1979, wrote, the class struggles of the early 1970s were 'confined to immediate defensive struggles against attacks by the Tory government, against unemployment, against wage restraint, against trade union legislation' and while the union movement had been successful in bringing down Edward Heath's Conservative Government in early 1974, it had not 'won millions of workers, or the Labour Party, to an alternative political perspective to the Tories or right wing Labour'.[17]

In Willie Thompson's account, published a year after the Party dissolved itself, he maintained that the during this time of heightened industrial militancy, the CPGB 'became briefly a national political force' and its trade union leaders 'achieved a real public standing beyond the bounds of their own trade union arena'.[18] Francis Beckett was far more sensational in his journalistic account of the CPGB's history when he wrote that there was a 'grain of truth' in the myth that 'during the 1970s powerful trade unions pulled the government's strings and… Bert Ramelson pulled the unions' strings'.[19] Both of these early post-CPGB histories perpetuate the myth that the CPGB itself indulged in – that the Party was a powerful organisation within the trade union movement. Harold Wilson had himself used this to explain the prolonging of the seamen's strike in June 1966, by denouncing the Communist Party union leaders as a 'tightly knit group of politically motivated men… determined to exercise backstage pressures… endangering the security of the industry and the economic welfare of the nation'.[20] More recent studies on CPGB industrial policy by Callaghan and McIlroy

have disputed the influence of the Party upon the labour movement, with McIlroy stating that the Party had an 'appreciable if minority role' in the labour movement, which 'punched well above its weight', but that its influence was fragile and within the boundaries of the Broad Left alliances.[21] However for McIlroy, the emphasis on industrial militancy had been dismissed too hastily by the reformers within the Party and the importance that they placed upon the 'new social movements', incorporated into the 'Broad Democratic Alliance', lacked the 'universality and power' of the trade unions, which were still viewed as the most effective means of socialist advance.[22] McIlroy has questioned what these new forms of action outside the 'old axis of the unions, Labour Party and CP' could achieve if the 'big industrial struggles of the 1970s had failed to qualitatively advance socialist consciousness'.[23] By 1974, the labour movement had been instrumental in the defeat of the Conservatives, but the pressures of an economic crisis saw the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party agree to the Social Contract, a voluntary halt to unrestrained collective bargaining in an attempt to keep down the inflation rate.

Thompson, a member of the CPGB in Scotland since the mid-1960s, suggests that the rise of Gramscism and the push for reform of Party strategy grew out of the questioning of the relevancy of pursuing a total opposition to wage restraint by two young Communist Party economists, David Purdy and Mike Prior. The Social Contract had been denounced by Bert Ramelson as a 'con-trick' and as an 'encouragement to resort to the old policy of trying to solve the crisis of capitalism by cutting the workers' living standards'.[24] On the other hand, Purdy argued that 'Inflation has become too profound a social and economic problem for us to remain satisfied with a purely defensive line'.[25] Purdy claimed that an 'incomes policy in the sense of a collectively and democratically agreed plan for the development of prices and incomes is an essential part of socialist economic planning'.[26] According to Thompson, Purdy and Prior were the 'most outspoken of a trend within the party increasingly ready to question the traditional political and social verities within which it operated', which drew upon the influence of Italian Marxist of the inter-war period, Antonio Gramsci.[27]

The influence of Gramsci upon the reformists within the CPGB was important for the 'recognition of the crucial role of intellectuals' in the working class movement and the

notion of the 'supremacy or,… the "hegemony", of the bourgeoisie in the ideological and cultural spheres… which enables the bourgeoisie to rule by consent rather than by open and continuous coercion'.[28] Using the Gramscian terminology of 'economism', the reformists criticised the emphasis on unrestrained collective bargaining at the expense of other political issues that were not addressed by trade union militancy. Economism was first used by Lenin to describe the tendency to focus on economic issues at trade union level without engaging in political activism based around the Party, although for the Gramscians in the CPGB, it could be 'broadly defined as any political tendency which gives predominance to economics over politics'.[29] Despite the influence of Gramsci upon the reformists, those who advocated for reforms in the Party should not be simply labelled 'Gramscians', as Thompson explained, the Gramscians 'represented only a small fraction of the party's membership', but the notion that the important political issues 'could not be explained or analysed in terms of class conflict was much more widely accepted'.[30] For Thompson, the Gramscian critique of 'economism' gained prominence through Purdy and Prior's challenge to the CPGB's industrial strategy, although Geoff Andrews argues that the rise of the Gramscian reformist wing can be traced back to the developments within the Young Communist League (YCL) in the late 1960s.

In most accounts, discussion of the Young Communist League is limited to the major opposition towards the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in late 1968 and its criticism of the Party leadership's avoidance of any strong condemnation of the Soviet Union. A link between support for the Soviet Union and traditional industrial militancy as the base for Communist Party principles is at the heart of many of the generalisations made in CPGB historiography of this period, perpetuated by the labelling of each other by the opposing 'factions' and by wider commentary of the Party's internal conflicts from outside analysts. The blurring of the line between 'sectarians', 'traditionalists' and 'Stalinists' is made within Thompson's account, although Thompson does stress that 'distinction has to be drawn between the party's mainstream and its Stalinist or Stalinoid wing'.[31] However, Beckett gives a much more simplistic explanation, describing the Party as consisting of 'two camps engaged in mortal combat', with the majority made up of 'the same people as in the days which followed the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, but the battleground had shifted' between 'Eurocommunists and class warriors'.[32]

On the other hand, Geoff Andrews in his volume of CPGB history and Mike Waite in his article for the collection of essays on the social and cultural aspects of the Communist Party, *Opening the Books*,[33] view the YCL as important to the development of cultural politics as an alternative to trade union militancy and the prominent role of youth culture within this development. The divide in the CPGB cannot be defined simply as 'Stalinist v Eurocommunist' as described by Laybourn and Murphy,[34] but between those who favoured the traditional strategies of industrial trade union work (which happened to include a sizeable pro-Soviet section and minor pro-Stalinist faction) and those who advocated major reforms within the CPGB to address the problems faced by those outside the traditional industrial working class base. For Andrews, the conflict inside the Party was between 'militant labourism' and 'socialist humanism', which created the 'decisive ideological contours with which the Party formed its communist identity' after the abandonment of the revolutionary tenets of Leninism with the adoption of The British Road to Socialism in 1951.[35] The debate of the Party's relationship with the Soviet Union is relegated to the background by Andrews, who is concerned primarily with the 'crisis of labourism, and the crisis of "class politics" that went with it', specific to the 'culture and practices of the British left' and not conditioned by the fortunes of the Soviet bloc.[36]

Andrews has been accused of playing down the impact of the Soviet Union on the CPGB and its contribution to the disputes that divided the Party by portraying a 'disturbing revisionist approach' that is 'designed to minimise [or] even airbrush' the role of the Soviet Union in the Party's affairs.[37] Andrews sees the intense debate over the condemnation of the 'intervention' (not 'invasion') by the Party leadership as the crystallisation of the division between the reformists and the traditionalists, an indication of the ideological transitions that had been occurring within the YCL since the mid-1960s.[38] Many of the Party members that condemned the invasion were students and younger Communists, who had endorsed the cultural politics fostered within the YCL and welcomed the Czech leader Alexander Dubcek's 'socialism with a human face'. However Andrews argues that the Party's division was not 'easily reducible to the Eurocommunist-Stalinist polarity', citing 'economist' industrial militants, such as Bert Ramelson, Tony Chater and Ron Bellamy, as condemning the Soviet invasion.[39]

After the events of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Soviet Union is barely mentioned by Andrews, but the Party's relationship with Moscow remained a contentious issue and provoked furious debates and divisions within the CPGB. An article by recently retired General Secretary John Gollan on the twentieth anniversary of Nikita Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' was published in *Marxism Today* at the beginning of 1976 in which Gollan maintained that the 'basic socialist foundations of the Soviet Union were unshaken' despite the crimes of the Stalin era.[40] John Saville, who left the Party in 1956, saw Gollan's article as the latest example of the Party continuing to suppress or obscure unpleasant facts and episodes in its history, remarking that even after twenty years, the Party was still incapable of critically discussing its own history.[41] Thompson described the furious debate that followed Gollan's article as the 'preliminary engagement' to the controversy over the 1977 draft of *The British Road to Socialism*.[42] Despite the Party's relationship with the Soviet Union being used by some authors, such as Beckett as well as Laybourn and Murphy, to discount the legitimacy of the CPGB, it is misleading to ignore the Soviet Union entirely. When the Party's weekly journal, *Comment*, under the editorship of reformer Sarah Benton, published an extract from a report by the Communist Party of France (PCF), *The USSR and Ouselves*, it produced a wide debate on both the denunciation and defence of Stalin, the CPSU and the CPGB's response.[43] The CPGB's own response to the continuing political repression in the Soviet Union urged 'the Soviet authorities to rescind the recent sentences and release those charged' with anti-Soviet activities, but still supported the 'friendship and co-operation between the British and Soviet peoples'.[44]

The YCL stood as a defining point in opposition to the Soviet Union, but Andrews shifts the emphasis slightly from the YCL being merely an enthusiastic opponent to the invasion of Czechoslovakia to an important base from which the 'later "Gramscian" approach took hold… within the party over the subsequent decade'.[45] While the revolutionary Trotskyist organisations such as the International Socialists (after 1976, the Socialist Workers Party) and the International Marxist Group (IMG) garnered most of the support from the student radicalism of the late 1960s, the YCL was greatly influenced by the substantial amount of students and young women (Andrews uses the term 'feminist', although this is linking a political position with a demographic)[46] who joined during this period. The effect of these recruits amongst the

student radicals and the wider social movements was not just limited to the YCL, but were prominent in the rise of Gramscism within the CPGB in the mid-1970s and the appeal for major reforms to the Party programme.

The effect of cultural politics in the YCL in the late 1960s greatly influencing those who advocated reforming the Party in the mid-1970s is a central argument for Andrews. It is acknowledged only as a footnote by Andrews, but the foremost discussion of the differences between industrial militancy and engagement in wider socio-political struggles was first addressed by members of the Communist Party in the debate over youth culture within *Marxism Today* between 1973 and 1975. Initiated by an article in 1973 by Martin Jacques, a leading reformist in the Party and the youngest Executive Committee member (promoted in 1968 at the age of 22), the debate continued until 1975 and as Mike Waite stated, discussed 'many of the deep splits between the traditionalists and modernising, Eurocommunist, currents which were to shape the remaining years of the Party',[47] including significant contributions from leading reformists, besides Jacques, as Judy Bloomfield and Tom Bell. However it must be noted that while the move away from the centrality of class conflict towards the inclusion of wider based social movements and cultural politics was indeed developed within the YCL, it was only after the debate over the validity of opposition to the Social Contract that an alternative to the primacy of defensive industrial militancy was established, due to the fact that the CPGB was now in disagreement with its traditional allies in the trade unions and the Labour left.

The high point of influence for the intellectuals and Gramscians who advocated major reforms for the CPGB was between 1976 and 1979, the 'peak period of Eurocommunism'.[48] Eurocommunism was developed by the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Spain (PCE) Santiago Carrillo during the mid-1970s, but was also applicable to other Communist Parties, most importantly the Communist Party of Italy (PCI). Santiago outlined that the Eurocommunists 'agreed on the need to advance to socialism with democracy, a multi-party system, parliaments and representative institutions… and the development of the broadest forms of popular participation at all levels and in all branches of social activity'.[49] Inside the CPGB, the term 'Eurocommunism' was not used with any uniformity, although most of the reformists identified broadly with its ideas, and was used to illustrate the strategy

based on the 'extension of democracy' through a 'dense network of social, cultural and political groupings based on a voluntary commitment', accepting that the Soviet model of the October Revolution was 'inappropriate… for advanced capitalist societies'.[50] This 'extension of democracy' was used by the reformists to explain that the acceptance of socialism through parliamentary democracy had been established with *The British Road to Socialism* since 1951 and that the 1977 draft, which crystallised the divisions between the traditionalists and the reformists, simply widened the scope of the Party's allies against monopoly capitalism. However by the mid-1980s, Eurocommunism had been marginalised as a political strategy on the continent and in many of the contemporary articles written during the final years of the CPGB, the term 'Eurocommunist' was used to describe the wing of the Party that had gained control of the Party leadership and associated with the theoretical journal, *Marxism Today*, mostly contrasted with the traditional industrial militants associated with the daily paper, *Morning Star*, of which the Party lost control in 1984-85.[51] In 1985, John Callaghan wrote that the 'Eurocommunist' wing could be 'more accurately described as pragmatists or "machine-minders" who have been persuaded more by the circulation success of *Marxism Today* than by the ideas of Antonio Gramsci'.[52]

In 1977, the Party drafted a new edition of *The British Road to Socialism*, which reflected the influence of the Gramscian/Eurocommunist ideals upon the reformists who had been able to acquire positions within the Party leadership, most notably being Martin Jacques as editor of *Marxism Today*, Sarah Benton as editor of *Comment* and Dave Cook as National Organiser. The importance of the 1977 edition was the official, yet highly disputed, acceptance that the struggle for socialism needed 'not only an expression of class forces, but of other important forces in society which emerge out of areas of oppression'.[53] The programme proposed that the CPGB needed to be at the centre of a 'broad democratic alliance' between the traditional labour movement and other social forces, with the Communist Party, 'as the organised Marxist political party', acting as a pivotal organisation with the 'special role… in developing broad left unity'.[54] The narrative history of the controversy surrounding the Party's 35th National Congress and the draft of the 1977 edition has been discussed elsewhere, although the best in-depth published narrative is found in Andrews' work, a more balanced, but much more abbreviated account can be found in

Callaghan's chapter on the CPGB in his 1987 work, *The Far Left in British Politics*.[55] It was given particular sensationalism when Francis Beckett described it as the 'Eurocommunists and class warriors now had their teeth firmly embedded in each others' throats', asserting that 'No term of abuse was too dreadful, no tactic was unjustifiable, no insult too cruel'.[56]

However while acknowledging that the debate over the reformers' emphasis upon the 'broad democratic alliance' was, at the time, considered of great importance, Willie Thompson declares the anxiety caused by the change from 'broad popular alliance', which was included in the 1968 edition, to the 'broad democratic alliance' was 'more of style and terminology than of real substance'.[57] The 1968 edition had already proposed the 'broad popular alliance' consisting of 'trade unions, co-operatives, the left in the Labour Party and the Communist Party' in alliance against monopoly capitalism, although it did acknowledge that this alliance could also include 'workers in factories, offices, professions, working farmers, producers and consumers, owner-occupiers and tenants, housewives, young people and students, pensioners, workers in the peace movement' among others.[58] Thompson states that the 'broad democratic alliance' did not fundamentally challenge this concept, but was more aimed at ending the 'oppression… rooted in anti-democratic structures at every level and in every sphere of society'.[59] For Thompson, the 1977 edition 'at most represented a modification of outlook rather than a fundamental alteration'.[60]

The Trotskyist interpretation of the decline of the CPGB merges with this point raised by Thompson. The common thread throughout the various Trotskyist groups that existed from the 1960s until the present is the notion that the CPGB was a 'Stalinist' party that had rejected revolutionary politics for Popular Frontism under the orders of the Soviet Union. Several different books have been written by different authors from the multitude of Trotskyist organisations,[61] which Kevin Morgan repudiated as determinist works outside the 'objective framework' of the British socio-economic and political environment, who view the CPGB as an 'organisation of professional revolutionaries to be judged by the correctness of its line'.[62] Despite nuances between Trotskyist interpretations based on (then) contemporary political arguments, there is general consensus among Trotskyists agreeing with the point made by Michael Woodhouse, that the CPGB occupied the position of a revolutionary party until 1926,

when the 'failure to prepare for revolutionary struggle in the General Strike' contributed to the party becoming 'Stalinized' and 'a willing tool of Stalin's policy of rapprochement with imperialism'.[63] In 2002, James Eaden and David Renton produced the fourth single volume Party history, a more balanced history of the CPGB from a Trotskyist perspective, strongly influenced by the politics of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). In their introduction, Eaden and Renton claim that a gap exists for a 'committed socialist history' of the Party and offer their account as a history 'sympathetic to the views of the founders, critical of the husk that the Communist Party became'.[64] Although highly critical of the Communist Party, Eaden and Renton's history is a commanding text, which covers some areas of the Party's history which have been overlooked and their interpretation of other episodes are significantly different from the other accounts.

In 1985, two articles were written in the SWP journal *International Socialism* by leading SWP members Alex Callinicos and Ian Birchall on the decline of the CPGB and the political framework of *Marxism Today*.[65] While Thompson claimed that in retrospect the changes made to the 1977 edition of *The British Road to Socialism* were not as dire as the internal controversy suggested, the same argument was made, for due to different political reasons, by Ian Birchall. In his account of the Party and the changes that had occurred since the 'Eurocommunists' took charge of the Party leadership in 1977, Birchall claims that the 'issue at stake is not reform versus revolution', but a choice of either 'Stalinism or social democracy'.[66] Following the Trotskyist line, Birchall states that this is so because the 'CPGB has not been a revolutionary organisation since 1926' and that the Communist Party had become an 'openly reformist party', although dwarfed by the Labour Party.[67] For the SWP, it did not matter whether the CPGB endorsed a 'broad popular alliance' or a 'broad democratic alliance', the Party's programme of socialism through parliamentary democracy and its emphasis on radicalising the Labour Party, either through the trade unions or wider social movements, because *The British Road to Socialism* inherently rejects the revolutionary class struggle. Eaden and Renton see the 'broad democratic alliance' as diminishing the reason for an independent Communist Party as the CPGB's position was weakened as 'membership shrunk, the party's trade union base withered and the party's claim to represent the broader movement outside of parliament became less and less credible'.[68] As the Party failed to stem the decline in

membership, which had been dropping since the mid-1960s and accelerated in the late 1970s with 25,293 in 1977 falling to 20,599 in 1979,[69] the CPGB's representation of itself as being central to the broad left alliance between the traditional labour movement and other social forces was clearly misguided. With membership declining, a diminished workplace presence and internal divisions, the Party was hardly in a position, which Martin Jacques had hoped, to 'transform the labour movement and popular consciousness'.[70]

In Eaden and Renton's history, they describe the 'broad democratic alliance' as 'following on from the Popular Front traditions in the party in the mid 1930s, which formed a thread running through the war time period and onwards to original drafting of *The British Road to Socialism*'[71] and that during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the Popular Front periods (roughly from 1935 to 1939 and 1941 to 1946) were used as a historical comparison to bolster flagging support for the Party. This leads back to the assertions made by McIlroy and Campbell on the histories of the Party since the mid-1980s. In his 1985 article, Birchall claimed that the acceptance of the Popular Front had produced a tendency within the Party to 'stress the national nature of the Communist Party, and to reintegrate the CP into the framework of national political life'.[72] Histories of the CPGB had appeared to be influenced 'by the dominance of Euro-Communism and nostalgic idealization of the Popular Front'.[73] The tendency of contemporary writing, such as Willie Thompson's single volume narrative history and the specialist studies by Andrew Thorpe, Nina Fishman and Matthew Worley, had been, according to McIlroy and Campbell, to 'present a one-sided, generally positive picture of an organically British party'.[74]

There has been a tendency within CPGB historiography to explain the demise of the Communist Party by claiming that Marxism is an alien concept to the British political system, which supposedly is immune to 'political extremism', although this does not explain why thousands of people did join the Communist Party. For Thompson, the failure of the Party was to not capitalise on its influence in the trade union movement in the period of heightened industrial militancy, 'symptomatic of the CP's continuing inability… to situate itself in the British political culture'.[75] Keith Laybourn and Dylan Murphy, author of the highly criticised *Under the Red Flag* single volume narrative history, state that one of the principal reasons for its failure was 'the fact that the

CPGB was formed too late to exert much influence on the trade union movement' in the 1920s,[76] although there is no mention of its industrial action during the 1960s and 1970s. In his review of the work, John McIlroy asserted that 'determinism and reductionism constitute an underlying problem' for Laybourn and Murphy,[77] illustrated by the authors' dismissal of the CPGB upon its ability in its formative years to draw mass working class support away from the well-established Labour Party. For the Trotskyists, the 'Stalinisation' of the CPGB after 1926 did not negate the need for a Marxist political party, with Eaden and Renton acknowledging the positive achievements of the Party, such as the formation of the National Unemployed Workers Movement, its struggle against domestic fascism, its opposition to American imperialism in the Cold War among other feats.[78]

By the mid-1960s, the CPGB had attempted to become a 'mass party',[79] relying on the twin strategy of Broad Left trade unionism and independent electoral work, alongside its continued call for Communist-Labour Party unity. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was buoyed by its involvement in the trade union struggles and able to appear a leading force within the British labour movement. However once the Labour Party was returned to power in 1974 and the mass strikes subsided, the Party was unable to conceal the fact that its trade union status had failed to halt its declining membership. The reason for the decline of the CPGB is an issue intrinsically linked with period between the end of the high period of industrial action in 1973-74 and the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, when the Party faced a re-evaluation of the centrality of class politics. Without further in-depth analysis of the changes that occurred within the Party during this period and what effects they had on the Party in the 1980s, the simplistic notion that the Party was determined to exist outside British political culture will remain unchallenged.

Notes

[1] The current debate over the importance of the Soviet Union in controlling CPGB policy stemmed from 'The Historiography of the Communist Party of Great Britain', seminar held 2 February 2003, Institute of Contemporary British History, 2003, http://www.icbh.ac.uk/witness/cpgb/ and debated within the pages of *Labour History Review*: Harriet Jones 'Is CPGB History Important?', *Labour History Review*, 67/3, December 2002, pp. 347-353; Alan Campbell & John McIlroy 'Is CPGB History Important? A Reply to Harriet Jones', *Labour History Review* 68/3, December 2003, pp. 385-390; John McIlroy & Alan Campbell 'Histories of the British Communist Party: A User's Guide', *Labour History*

Review, 68/1, April 2003, pp. 33-59; James Eaden & David Renton 'Comment: The Inner-Party Critics', *Labour History Review* 69/3, December 2004, pp. 349-354; Nina Fishman 'A First Revisionist Replies to Her Revisionists', *Labour History Review* 69/3, December 2004, pp. 355-361; Andrew Thorpe 'Communist Party History: A Reply to Campbell and McIlroy', *Labour History Review* 69/3, December 2004, pp. 363-365; Matthew Worley 'Echoes from the Dustbin of History: A Reply to Alan Campbell and John McIlroy', *Labour History Review* 69/3, December 2004, pp. 367-372; Alan Campbell & John McIlroy 'A Reply to Critics', *Labour History Review* 69/3, December 2004, pp. 373-380; Nina Fishman 'CPGB History at the Centre of Contemporary History: A Rejoinder to Alan Campbell and John McIlroy', *Labour History Review* 69/3, December 2004, pp. 381-383; Andrew Thorpe 'CPGB History at the Centre of Contemporary History 2002: A Rejoinder', *Labour History Review* 69/3, December 2004, pp. 385-387; Alan Campbell & John McIlroy 'The Last Word on Communism', *Labour History Review* 70/1, April 2005, pp. 97-101

[2] Between February 1956 and February 1958, over 8,000 members left the Communist Party. This was in reaction the CPGB leadership's unwillingness to discuss its uncritical support for the Soviet Union during the Stalin era and then after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in November 1956, as well as the dismissal of the Minority Report on Inner-Party Democracy at the 25th National Congress in April 1957. Membership figures taken from Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause: British Communism, 1920-1991*, Pluto Press, London, 1992, p. 218; Henry Pelling, *The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile*, A&C Black, London, 1975, p. 193

[3] Matthew Worley, 'Reflections on Recent British Communist Party History', *Historical Materialism*, 4, Summer 1999, p. 243

[4] M. Worley, 'Reflections on Recent British Communist Party History', p. 257; Francis Beckett, *Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party*, Merlin Press, London, 1995

[5] Worley, 'Reflections on Recent British Communist Party History', p. 257

[6] J. McIlroy & A. Campbell, 'Histories of the British Communist Party', pp. 33-59

[7] J. McIlroy & A. Campbell, 'Histories of the British Communist Party', p. 34

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