

# **The Communist International through a British Lens\***

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**Cross-Cultural Communism: Spanish, British, and Chinese Socialists inside  
Russia's International Revolution**

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The Communist International (Comintern) was founded to export the Russian Revolution. Nominally independent of the Soviet state, it involved communist parties - often referred to as Sections - from around the world, but was directed from Moscow. The Comintern took an interest in Britain from its inception, invited British delegates to its founding congress in March 1919, and took an active role in the founding of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in the summer of 1920. From the Comintern's point of view Britain offered a good opportunity for revolution beyond Russia. As the leading imperial power following the First World War, it was a target for agitation against imperialism and colonialism, and a strong labour movement presented opportunities for mass mobilization. Willing participants in the programme of world revolution were found, and the CPGB rose out of longer-term trends in the British left, and an admiration of the Russian Revolution. Despite this, the CPGB and the prospects for revolution were an almost constant disappointment to Moscow. Britain remained stable, and mostly under Conservative governments, while the Party remained relatively small in comparison to other national parties with membership around 4,000 in 1920, rising to 12,000 in 1926, but dipping to approximately 2,500 by 1930, and despite recruitment after adoption of the popular front remaining below 20,000 by the start of the

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Second World War.<sup>1</sup> The peak of revolutionary opportunity came with the General Strike of 1926, but the CPGB was unable to turn this into a wider British revolution. What had started out as hopefulness turned to disappointment and friction. Clearly, British communists and the Comintern had a troubled relationship, which is mirrored in the historiography.<sup>2</sup>

This paper addresses the Comintern through a British lens. It will examine the contemporary relationship of the Comintern and the CPGB, the views of British Communists and the British Government of the Comintern, and historians' analysis of the Comintern. An appreciation shall be offered as to how the Comintern has been refracted through a British lens, and the ways in which the image has become distorted. Consideration is made of why historical research in Britain on the Comintern has taken the direction it has, and an alternative approach and view will be outlined. It is apparent in Comintern historiography that there is no real agreed framework for transnational comparisons, despite the almost ideal conditions of a centralized Comintern archive. The result is that British views of the Comintern do not always match with those of historians of other nationalities, despite a number of symposia and developing international networks of scholars since the archives were opened.<sup>3</sup> The issue of language comes to bear in this, but so too does a broader matter of the cultural predispositions of historians and their approach to international communism.

As a result, there is a need to reexamine the approach towards Comintern history, and to appreciate the multiple forms of communism that emerged at both an international and a national level, each with their own cultures. The Comintern can be read in two distinct ways – as a centralized Soviet institution committed to fomenting

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Thorpe, "The Communist International and the British Communist Party," in Andrew Thorpe and Tim Rees (eds), *International Communism and the Communist International, 1919-1943* (Manchester, 1998), p. 67; Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-1943* (Manchester, 2000), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> RGASPI, f. 495, op. 100, d. 150, cited in Thorpe, "The Communist International and the British Communist Party," p. 67; Jan Valtin, *Out of the Night* (Edinburgh, 2002 [1941]), p. 285.

<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Narinsky and Jurgen Rojahn (eds), *Centre and Periphery: The History of the Comintern in the Light of New Documents* (Amsterdam, 1996); Serge Wolikow (ed.), *Une Histoire en révolution. Du bon usage des archives, de Moscou et d'ailleurs* (Dijon, 1996); Tauno Saarela and Kimmo Rentola (eds.), *Communism: National and International* (Helsinki, 1998); Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe (eds), *International Communism and the Communist International, 1919-4*; Matthew Worley (ed.), *In Search of Revolution: International Communist Parties in the Third Period* (London, 2004); *International Newsletter of Communist Studies* (<http://www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/projekte/JHK-news/>); *Jahrbuch für historische Kommunismusforschung*; *Communist History Network Newsletter* (<http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/chnn/>).

international revolution and as a collection of national communist parties. The centre had a Sovietized culture, which agents within it adopted. Where Britain is concerned some of the Soviet aspects can be seen, but so too can a distinct national communist culture, rooted in the long term British political culture of parliamentary democracy, imperialism, and of working within the labour movement, and for a time through the Labour Party.<sup>4</sup> Additionally a set of national characteristics is also discernable of modesty, insularism, patriotism and a desire for personal liberty, which could bring British communists into conflict with the domination of the Comintern and its international ideals.<sup>5</sup> The CPGB has been read in differing ways, as either party shaped and controlled by the Comintern, or as a national party with its own agenda and distinct characteristics. The reality is that it was both of these things, and both facets need to be examined.

Turning to the writing of Comintern history in Britain, there is a need not only to address the conflict of international and national cultures, but also to address this from the point of view of the historian. In general, existing studies of the Comintern tend towards the investigation of member parties or prominent individuals in isolation or as distinct from the Comintern, largely stemming from a methodology rooted in approaching the Comintern through the lens of a single national situation. British works on the Comintern that engage heavily with the CPGB or its leading figures are no exception to this.

This makes British historiography with respect to the Comintern somewhat problematic. Much of it deals with the CPGB as an almost separate entity from the Comintern. While there is no doubt that the CPGB was distinct, it was founded and shaped by the Comintern. While the degree of Comintern impact on the party is an area much discussed, the CPGB in the interwar years ought not to be examined in isolation without being set into the context of the Comintern. This approach has led to secondary problems – the assumption at times that the CPGB represents either a typical or a special case as a Comintern member party, leading to notions of how the Comintern functioned in its totality to be inferred, not always convincingly. To date the Comintern has been refracted by Britons through a lens that distorts as it fails to adequately situate the CPGB

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<sup>4</sup> Working through the Labour Party was abandoned during the Third Period as the doctrines of class against class and social fascism rendered such an approach unworkable.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Mandler, *The British National Character* (New Haven, 2006).

in relation to the overarching institution. A more nuanced approach must be adopted that treats the relationship between the CPGB and the Comintern as a two-way process, and addresses the dualistic nature of the national and international communist movements. The national must be treated as a part of the international, and looked at in a more comparative light in order to assess the nature of the Comintern, the variance between national parties, and the role of the Britain in the programme of world revolution.

The literature is evolving, but still approaches the Comintern from an almost entirely British perspective. Until the 1960s, there was little critical work on the CPGB, followed by a series of official histories more concerned with the national party than its relationship with Moscow.<sup>6</sup> In more recent years archives have become accessible and renewed scholarly interest has produced a number of works on the Comintern and British communists.<sup>7</sup> Much of this remains histories of a national, rather than an international movement, although some attempt has been made to examine the relationship between the Comintern and the CPGB in a revisionist mould.<sup>8</sup> Much of the research makes use of sources in English, from British archives, which while understandable does lead to some problems of interpretation of the CPGB in a wider or comparative context.<sup>9</sup> Where the Comintern Archives in Moscow are used, these again tend to be the files of the CPGB in

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<sup>6</sup> James Klugman, *The History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, volume 1: Formation and Early Years, 1920-1924* (London, 1968); Klugman, *The History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, volume 2: The General Strike, 1925-1926* (London, 1969); Noreen Branson, *The History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, volume 3: 1927-1941* (London, 1985); Branson, *The History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, volume 4: 1942-1956* (London, 1987). It should be noted that Klugman was fortunate enough to be given access to the Comintern archives in Moscow.

<sup>7</sup> See Thorpe, 'Comintern "Control" of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920 – 43', *English Historical Review*, No.113 (1998), pp. 637–62; Worley, 'The Communist International, the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Third Period, 1928 – 32', *European History Quarterly*, Vol.30, No.2 (2000), pp.353 – 78; John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, 'For a Revolutionary Workers' Government: The Communist International, the Communist Party of Great Britain and Revisionist Interpretations of the Third Period, 1927 – 35', *European History Quarterly*, Vol.32, No.4 (2002), pp.535 – 69; Kevin Morgan, 'Labour with Knobs On: The Recent Historiography of the British Communist Party', in Stefan Berger (ed.), 'Labour and Social History in Great Britain: Historiographical Reviews and Agendas', *Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts für soziale Bewegungen*, Vol.27 (2002), pp.69 – 84; Gidon Cohen and Morgan, 'Stalin's Sausage Machine: British Students at the International Lenin School, 1926 – 1937', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol.13, No.4 (2002), pp.327 – 55; McIlroy and Campbell, 'Histories of the British Communist Party: A User's Guide', *Labour History Review*, Vol.68, No.1 (2003), pp.33 – 59; McIlroy, McLoughlin, Campbell and Halstead, 'Forging the Faithful: The British at the International Lenin School', *Labour History Review*, Vol.68, No.1 (2003), pp.99 – 128; Noah Fishman, 'CPGB History at the Centre of Contemporary British History', *Labour History Review*, Vol.69, No.3 (2004), pp.381 – 3; Campbell, McLoughlin and Halstead, 'The International Lenin School: A Response to Cohen and Morgan', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol.15, No.1 (2004), pp.51 – 76.

<sup>8</sup> Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-1943*; Worley, *Class Against Class*.

<sup>9</sup> CPGB archives are held at the Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester UK

English with little attention paid to the Russian documents.<sup>10</sup> While this might seem unproblematic, there are issues with translation and interpretation that have gone unnoticed, not just by scholars, but also by contemporaneous agents and observers. A large volume of documents was poorly translated by non-native English speakers, leading to inaccuracy and subsequent misreading. That few British researchers of the Comintern have a command of Russian, and have made assumptions about the accuracy of translations has compounded this issue. Additionally, the Comintern's propensity to think and speak in Soviet terms - issuing signals within a framework that would be understood by a Soviet, but not necessarily an international, audience - leads to a lack of nuance in translation, which has created further problems.<sup>11</sup>

Some recent work has taken a biographical approach, but this does not always give rise to a better understanding of the Comintern, although it does shed more light on the national culture of the CPGB. The CPGB Biographical Project at the University of Manchester between 1999 and 2001 took a prosopographical approach to the CPGB studying approximately 70 biographical works and commissioning over 100 interviews.<sup>12</sup> The product has been a series of biographical accounts of party members with the aim of analyzing the nature of the British party.<sup>13</sup> Even so, this has mostly produced biographies of the party elite without dealing well with regional differences or gauging the outlook and opinions of the party rank and file. It is easier to see the views of the party elite, the wrangling between them, what they thought of Moscow, and what Moscow thought of them and the party. This is not unique to the CPGB, and has been remarked upon by Annie Kriegel and Harvey Klehr with respect to the Communist Partie Francais (PCF) and the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA).<sup>14</sup> What has yet to be

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<sup>10</sup> Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow*, p. 4. CPGB files may be found in RGASPI, f. 495, op. 100.

<sup>11</sup> For more see Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*, (Berkeley, 1995), ch. 5; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Tear Off the Masks!* (Princeton, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> The interviews are held in the National Sound Archive at the British Library.

<sup>13</sup> John McIlroy, Kevin Morgan, and Alan Campbell (eds), *Communist People, Party Lives*; Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn (eds), *Agents of the Revolution: New Biographical Approaches to the History of International Communism in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Bern, 2004); Morgan, Cohen and Flinn (eds), *Communists and British Society, 1920-1991: People of a Special Mould* (London, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Annie Kriegel, *The French Communists: Profile of a People* (Chicago, IL, 1972); Harvey Klehr, *Communist Cadre: The Social Background of the American Communist Party Elite* (Stanford, CA, 1976).

properly conducted is a systematic analysis of the prosopographical data – the project remains more interested in life histories of the individuals than of the party as a whole.

On the whole, when looking at the Comintern from the perspective of the CPGB, historians have failed to appreciate the Comintern in a Soviet context. The Comintern, although international, was essentially a Soviet foreign policy institution, subject to the priorities of the Soviet state, displaying Soviet cultural norms and practices. British historians, when looking to the CPGB have not all effectively engaged with the Soviet elements of the Comintern, and its role in foreign policy. This ignores important aspects of Comintern history, particularly in the light of the bolshevization of the Comintern after 1924, and does not give rise to a full understanding of some of the ways in which the Comintern attempted to shape its British section, or the problems encountered on both sides of the relationship.

While historians have struggled to understand the CPGB and its place within the Comintern, so the Comintern similarly found it difficult to define its relationship to the CPGB. The central organs of the Comintern were out of touch with national parties, and more engaged in attempts to shape them into a consistent organizational structure and behaviours. As a result the Comintern consistently misunderstood, or willfully ignored, the national situation and characteristics of Britain and the CPGB, remaining more focused on attempts to ascribe a single monolithic model onto the party. Harry Pollitt, General Secretary of the party between 1929 and 1939 and 1941 to 1956, would find this to be increasingly irksome, despite having been seen as an ideal Stalinist party leader, and on at least one occasion would ask Moscow somewhat tersely for forgiveness for ‘being British’.<sup>15</sup> While Pollitt may have adopted a defensive nationalist stance, his statement betrays that there was something that he saw as distinctly British about the CPGB, which the Comintern never understood and were powerless to change. This is not to suggest that the hand of the Comintern did not shape the CPGB, but it was never able to fully mould the British party in the manner that it wanted.

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<sup>15</sup> Pollitt to Campbell, 30 March 1939, RGAPSI, f. 495, op. 100, d. 1040, cited in Thorpe, “The Communist International and the British Communist Party,” p. 68; Thorpe, “Comintern ‘Control’ of the Communist Party of Great Britain,” *English Historical Review*, vol. 13, no. 452 (1998), p. 661.

Misunderstanding on the part of the Comintern was one thing, but there was also an unrealistic expectation for the emulation of the model presented by the Comintern of the ‘ideal party’ in the form of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). The CPGB, although established to meet the Comintern programme of world revolution, retained a distinctiveness grounded in the national situation and culture. It differed from the CPSU in certain key ways: it was an amalgamation of parties or fractions from the British left; it was not a party forged through underground struggle with a leadership that had spent formative years in exile or prison; and it was a fully legal party that functioned through parliamentary channels. As a result, the CPGB presented a very different kind of organization to the Bolsheviks, in a very different political milieu. It was, therefore, unlikely that it would be possible for a party that functioned in the political structure of Britain to take on all aspects of a fully bolshevized party with a clear hierarchy and structure, a commitment to democratic centralism, and rigid discipline. Some aspects were adopted, with organizational structures and terminology mimicking those of the Comintern, and the implementation of instructions and advice from Moscow.<sup>16</sup> Some of this met with resistance and it would seem that the Comintern was not only unrealistic in its push to completely Bolshevize the CPGB, but that nobody in the central hierarchy of the Comintern ever stopped to question why the CPGB might be different to the CPSU or other Comintern parties. The result was that the CPGB was viewed as performing poorly and that British ‘social-democratic tendencies’ hopelessly tainted its agents.<sup>17</sup>

In part this stemmed from the fact that the CPGB enjoyed legal status as a political party. Certain aspects of the ‘ideal’ party or agent were absent as a result, particularly with respect to discipline and secrecy. One major area of criticism from the Comintern was that British communists did not engage in sufficient illegal party work, by which it meant incitement to insurrection and sabotage. It has been claimed by contemporary observers and by historians that as the party was legal, then there was no

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<sup>16</sup> Thorpe, “The Communist Party of Great Britain and the Communist International,” pp. 71-2.

<sup>17</sup> RGASPI, f. 531, op. 1, d. 65 (1934); d. 66 (1934); d. 81 (1935); d. 82 (1935); d. 104 (1936); d. 105 (1936); d. 112 (1936); d. 126 (1937). Politburo Protocol 68, 2-28<sup>th</sup> February 1939, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 24, l. 104, reproduced in Adibekov (ed.), *Politbiuro TSK RKP(b)-VKP(b) i Komintern*, p. 772; A list of Communist Party members ‘formerly in other parties, having Trotskyist and Rightist tendencies,’ sent by F. Kotelnikov to the NKVD, 4 September 1936, RGASPI, f. 546, op. 1, d. 376, ll. 30-36, reproduced in William Chase, *Enemies Within the Gates? The Comintern and the Stalinist Repression, 1934-39*, (New Haven, 2002), pp. 178-.

need for illegal work, leading some to have viewed CPGB actions as entirely legal.<sup>18</sup> There is an assumption here that illegal party work meant the work of illegal parties, which in one sense it certainly did, and that therefore a legal party could have no illegal aspects to its functions. This misunderstanding, born out of a misreading of terminology, caused problems in the assessment of the Comintern's demands with respect to party activity, with Moscow frequently painted in the light of asking the impossible.

At the same time as we see a misreading from Britons, the Comintern was unable to attune its desires and signals to the British situation. Britons were, it seems, somewhat resistant to bolshevization and domination by the Soviets. British communists who spent time in Moscow, either as CPGB representatives or as students at the International Lenin School (ILS) give good examples of the way in which the Comintern's instructions and language did not necessarily make sense in a British context. Time spent in Moscow meant that individuals could easily lose touch with affairs at home, and they could miscommunicate with both the Comintern and the CPGB as a result. Coupled to this was a need to impress the Soviets with adherence to ideology and make use of appropriate language. On return from Moscow, individuals were regarded as dogmatic and inflexible, out of touch, and as speaking an incomprehensible 'foreign language' of Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, and as a result did not reintegrate well into the CPGB.<sup>19</sup> A gulf between the centre and the periphery is discernable here and the Comintern can be seen to have not appreciated how Britons would receive and interpret Soviet modes of behaviour and presentation, and Britons did not properly understand how the Comintern was working in the context of their own party. This led to resistance, confusion, and the misreading of the national and international situation.

Perhaps the best example of the Comintern's misreading of the situation in Britain occurred during the British General Strike of May 1926. Following the failed revolution in Germany in October 1923, Britain was seen as the most likely place for revolution to take hold. The Comintern and the Soviets shifted their focus towards Britain, where united front tactics were yielding results within the labour movement. 1926 provided a great deal of hope for the Comintern that revolution was about to take

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<sup>18</sup> Cohen and Morgan, "Stalin's Sausage Machine".

<sup>19</sup> Arnot to Pollitt, 26<sup>th</sup> February 1931, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 100, d. 739, quoted in Cohen and Morgan, 'Stalin's Sausage Machine,' p. 332; Worley, *Class Against Class*, p. 202.



place in Britain. Although the Bolsheviks had failed to see it coming, the General Strike of May that year was read as a turning point, with the British working class opening a new revolutionary epoch. Discussion by the Soviets involved more than just the Comintern, although its leader, Zinoviev, took the leading role and was the best informed of the Soviet Government. It was agreed that the strike should be turned to political ends, although the Comintern and the Soviets took little real action beyond sending money to support strikers.<sup>20</sup> Surprisingly, the CPGB was barely mentioned until the analysis in early June 1926 of the strikes' failure to turn to revolution, when it was seriously criticized for its inadequacies in agitating within the labour movement and for its small membership. The CPGB was seen as too weak to achieve revolutionary ends, and to have worked with reformist trade unions, in part as a result of British social-democratic tendencies, but also because of insufficient work to radicalize the labour movement. It is clear, however, that the Comintern misunderstood the situation in Britain, mishandled it and made the CPGB something of a scapegoat for its own failings. A more radical approach than the CPGB offered was called for, which manifested itself with the announcement of the Third Period in 1928. Despite the failure of revolution in Britain, the weakness of the CPGB, and the Comintern's misunderstandings the British General Strike acted as a catalyst for change within the international communist movement.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Politburo Protocol no. 23, 4 May 1926, reproduced in *Politbiuro TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B) povestki dnya zasedanii 1919-1952*, vol. 1, p 456.

<sup>20</sup> Politburo Protocol no. 24, 6 May 1926, reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 456-7.

D. Z. Manuilsky, "Angliiskaya stachka I stabilizatsiya kapitalizma," *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional*, 1926, no. 5-6 (54-55) pp. 46-56; Molotov and Bukharin to Stalin (coded), 1 June 1926, RGASPI, f. 82, op. 1, d. 114, l. , reproduced in Lars Lih et al (eds), *Stalin's Letters to Molotov, 1925-1936* (New Haven, 1995), p. 106; RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 684, l. 1-193, reproduced in *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politburo TsK RKP(B)-VKP(B) 1923-1938 gg.* (Moscow, 2007), vol. 1, pp.830-44, 853-4; "Stenogramma zasedaniya Politbiuro TsK VKP(B) po vosprosu "Ob urokakh ahgliiskoi vseobshei stachki" 3 iunya 1926 g." RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 684, l. 1-193, reproduced in *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politburo*, vol. 1, pp. 740; Politburo Protocol no. 23, 4 May 1926, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 3, l. 57-8, reproduced in Adibekov et al. (eds), *Politbiuro TsK rKP(B)-VKP(B) i Evropa. Resheniya «osoboi papki» 1923-1939* (Moscow, 2001), pp. 115-6; Politburo Protocol no. 24, 6 May 1926, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 3, l. 60-3, reproduced in *Politbiuro TsK rKP(B)-VKP(B) i Komintern.1919-1943 dokumenty* (Moscow, 2004), pp. 362-4; W K and Zelda and Coates, *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations* (London, 1943), pp. 229-31; *Hansard* 14 June 1926, col. 1960-1, cited in *ibid.*, p. 231; Soviet note to British Government, 15 June 1926, cited in *ibid.*, p. 232; Klugman, *History of the Communist Part of Great Britain: Volume 2 The General Strike, 1925-1926* (London, 1969), p. 319-20. The TUC refused the money, although the Miner's Unions accepted Soviet aid totaling £1.25 million (in contemporary terms this equals approx £50 million in the UK).

<sup>21</sup> Alastair Kocho-Williams, "The Soviet Union and the British General Strike of 1926," unpublished conference paper, British International History Group Annual Conference, 3-6 September 2008, pp. 14-15. Copy available on request.

Britain, it seems, was important to the Comintern, although perhaps not quite for the reasons that the Comintern had expected.

The General Strike caused other problems. While British Communists and the Comintern had a tense relationship, fraught with misunderstandings, so too did the Comintern and the British Government. The Comintern caused a great amount of difficulty for Soviet foreign policy with respect to Britain – Foreign Commissar Georgii Chicherin would label the agency as Soviet diplomacy’s ‘enemy number one’.<sup>22</sup> While the Comintern remained bent on exporting revolution, Britain was one of the major areas of friction between competing Soviet foreign policy aims, and the drive for normalization in diplomacy was almost derailed by the actions, real and supposed, of the Comintern. The British Government, under no illusion that the Comintern represented Soviet attempts to promote revolution in Britain and the British Empire, issued repeated warnings to the Soviets about Comintern activity and the consequences that it would have for Anglo-Soviet relations. There was, it would seem, a genuine fear that the Comintern threatened Britain’s interests, and this proved to be a stumbling point for Soviet diplomacy in the interwar years. Interestingly, the demands were rarely laid at the feet of the CPGB, but were directed more towards its parent institution, suggesting a greater concern about Comintern actions in the Empire than in the mainland. This was done through diplomatic channels, rather than via the CPGB, indicating that the British viewed the Comintern as answerable to the Soviet government, and did not necessarily see the CPGB as tied to the Comintern sufficiently to communicate through it. This also shows that the British saw the hand of the Comintern more in Soviet diplomacy than in the CPGB and that they held, rightly, suspicions that some Soviet diplomats and trade officials were Comintern agents.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Posledniaia sluzhebnaia zapiska G. V. Chicherina,’ Arkhiv Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii (AP RF), f. 48, op. 1, d. 66, l. 38-71, reproduced in *Istochnik*, 1995, vol. 6, p. 108.

<sup>23</sup> Note from Curzon, 8 October 1920, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 17, d. 246, l. 19; Memorandum in reply to Chicherin’s memorandum to the Foreign Office of 2 May 1923, June 1923, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 23, d. 329, l. 70-71; Litvinov to Johnson, 12 May 1923, AVP RF, f. 04, op. Edmund Ovey (Foreign Office) to Jan Berzin (Assistant Official Soviet Representative in London), 12 October 1923 (copy), AVP RF, f. 069 op. 7, p. 7, d. 14, l. 30; Text to be telegraphed from Klishko to Chicherin no. 6066, 9 December 1921 (handwritten), AVP RF, f. 069, op. 6, p. 16, d. 81, l. 18; Minutes of meeting between Curzon and Krasin, 17 May 1923, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 23, d. 330, l. 2; Chicherin to Curzon, 9 November 1920, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, d. 245, p. 17, l. 24; Memorandum in reply to Chicherin’s memorandum to Foreign Office of 29

Repeated demands were made to the Soviets that they desist from propaganda. Soviet diplomats were only permitted to enter Britain ‘provided [they] comply with the normal conditions for friendly international intercourse’ and did not engage in action ‘against the British Constitution and British institutions.’<sup>24</sup> The preamble to the Anglo-Soviet Trade Agreement of 1921 made it expressly clear that a complete absence of anti-British agitation was expected as a condition for the maintenance of friendly relations. Lord Curzon, British Foreign Secretary, issued an ultimatum to the Soviets in May 1923 in which he accused them of having ‘systematically violated’ this clause in both Britain and the Empire.<sup>25</sup> The British were clearly highly suspicious of the Comintern, and

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May 1923, 5 June 1923, AVPRF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 23, d. 329, l. 71; Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Chicherin no. 285/1068, December 1918, AVP RF, f. 140, op. 2, p. 1, d. 1, l. 13; Reply of the British Government to Krasin’s note of 19 June 1920, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 17, d. 246, l. 12; Note from Curzon, 8 October 1920, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 17, d. 246, l. 19; Memorandum in reply to Chicherin’s memorandum to the Foreign Office of 29 May 1923, 5 June 1923, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 23, d. 329, l. 71; Foreign Office to Narkomindel n.d. (1921 – responding to Litvinov’s letter 7 September 1921), AVP RF f. 04, op. 4, d. 278, p. 20, l. 23; Litvinov to Johnson, 12 May 1923, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 27, d. 384, l. 21-23; Minutes of the meeting between Curzon and Krasin, 17 May 1923, 11.30 am, AVP RF, f.04, op. 4, p.23, d.330, l. 2; AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 23, d. 329, l. 70-1; *Trade Agreement between His Britannic Majesty’s Government and the Government of the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic*, Parliamentary Paper, 1921, cmd. 1207, pp.2-3.

<sup>24</sup> Reply of the British Government to Krasin’s note of 19 June 1920, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 17, d. 246, l. 12; Note from Lord Curzon (British Foreign Secretary), 8 October 1920, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 17, d. 246, l. 19; Memorandum in reply to Chicherin’s memorandum to the Foreign Office of 2 May 1923, June 1923, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 23, d. 329, l. 71.

<sup>25</sup> Minutes of the meeting between Curzon and Krasin, 17 May 1923, 11.30 am, AVP RF, f.04, op. 4, p.23, d.330, l. 2; AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 23, d. 329, l. 70-1; AVP RF, f. 069, op. 7, p. 7, d. 14, l. 30; Text to be telegraphed from Klishko to Chicherin no. 6066, 9 December 1921 (handwritten), AVP RF, f. 069, op. 6, p. 16, d. 81, l. 18; Minutes of meeting between Curzon and Krasin, 17 May 1923, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 23, d. 330, l. 2; Chicherin to Curzon, 9 November 1920, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, d. 245, p. 17, l. 24; Memorandum in reply to Chicherin’s memorandum to Foreign Office of 29 May 1923, 5 June 1923, AVPRF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 23, d. 329, l. 71; Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Chicherin no. 285/1068, December 1918, AVP RF, f. 140, op. 2, p. 1, d. 1, l. 13; Reply of the British Government to Krasin’s note of 19 June 1920, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 17, d. 246, l. 12; Note from Curzon, 8 October 1920, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 17, d. 246, l. 19; Memorandum in reply to Chicherin’s memorandum to the Foreign Office of 29 May 1923, 5 June 1923, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 23, d. 329, l. 71; Foreign Office to Narkomindel n.d. (1921 – responding to Litvinov’s letter 7 September 1921), AVP RF f. 04, op. 4, d. 278, p. 20, l. 23; Litvinov to Johnson, 12 May 1923, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 27, d. 384, l. 21-23; Minutes of the meeting between Curzon and Krasin, 17 May 1923, 11.30 am, AVP RF, f.04, op. 4, p.23, d.330, l. 2; AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 23, d. 329, l. 70-1; *Trade Agreement between His Britannic Majesty’s Government and the Government of the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic*, Parliamentary Paper, 1921, cmd. 1207, pp.2-3. The significant paragraph from the preamble to the Trade agreement reads: ‘That each party refrains from hostile action or undertakings against the other and from conducting outside of its own borders any official propaganda direct or indirect against the institutions of the British Empire or the Russian Soviet Republic respectively, and more particularly that the Russian Soviet Government refrains from any attempt by military or diplomatic or any other form of action or propaganda to encourage any of the peoples of Asia in any form of hostile action against British interests or the British Empire, especially in India and in the Independent State of Afghanistan. The British Government gives a similar particular undertaking to the

matters were made worse in 1924 with the Zinoviev Letter, a forgery purporting to have been sent from the Comintern to the CPGB instructing the organization of mutiny in the British Army and an uprising against the state.<sup>26</sup> In 1926 the sending of money from the Soviet Union in support of striking workers brought forth cries of ‘red gold’ and some within the British Government accused the Comintern of attempting to turn the General Strike towards a wider revolution.<sup>27</sup> The Soviets weathered all of these attempts to have them desist from propaganda against Britain, but the events of May 1927 were to display the reality of British threats, when on the supposed evidence of Soviet revolutionary activity through the Comintern in China, the British raided the premises of the Soviet trading agency ARCOS and the Soviet Trade Delegation in London.<sup>28</sup> The police did not find the missing document they alleged they were searching for, but claimed to have found a list of ‘illegals’ in the possession of one employee and other documents from which the British drew conclusive proof that the Soviet Union and the Comintern was engaged in revolutionary subterfuge against Britain.<sup>29</sup> A rupture in Anglo-Soviet relations followed, the wounds of which were never properly healed, the Comintern

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Russian Soviet Government in respect of the countries which formed part of the former Russian Empire and which have now become independent.’

<sup>26</sup> Litvinov to Johnson, 12 May 1923, AVP RF, f. 04, op. 4, p. 27, d. 384, l. 21-23; Christopher Andrew, ‘The British Secret Service and Anglo-Soviet Relations in the 1920s, Part 1: From the Trade Negotiations to the Zinoviev Letter’, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1977), pp. 673-706; Gill Bennet, *A Most Extraordinary and Mysterious Business: The Zinoviev Letter of 1924* (London, 1999); Nick Baron, ‘Zinoviev Letter’ in James Millar et al (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Russian History*, vol. 4, p. 1733.

<sup>27</sup> W K and Zelda and Coates, *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations* (London, 1943), pp. 229-31; *Hansard* 14 June 1926, col. 1960-1, cited in *ibid.*, p. 231; Soviet note to British Government, 15 June 1926, cited in *ibid.*, p. 232; Lars Lih et al. (eds), *Stalin’s Letters to Molotov 1925-1936* (New Haven, 1995), p. 133; Zara Steiner, *The Lights That Failed: European International History 1919-1933* (Oxford, 2005), p. 537; Politburo Protocol, no. 23, 4 May 1926, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 3, l. 57-8, reproduced in Adibekov et al (eds), *Politbiuro TSK RKP(b)-VKP(b) i Komintern*, pp. 360-362; Politburo Protocol, no. 24, 5-6 May 1926, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 3, l. 60-3, reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 362-4; Politburo Protocol, no. 25, 7 May 1926, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 3, l. 65-6, reproduced in Adibekov et al (eds), *Politbiuro TSK RKP(b)-VKP(b) i Evropa: Resheniia ‘osoboi papki’*, pp. 119-20.

<sup>28</sup> The All Russian Co-operative Society, established in 1920, was a Russian joint stock trading company connected to the Trade Delegation.

<sup>29</sup> Stanley Baldwin’s statement to the House of Commons, 24 May 1927, as quoted in William and Zelda Coates, *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations* (London, 1943), p. 277. For a detailed treatment of the Arcos raid see Harriette Flory, ‘The Arcos Raid and the Rupture of Anglo-Soviet Relations, 1927,’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 12, no. 4 (1977), pp. 707-24; ‘The Russian Trade Organisation and Revolutionary Organisations in the UK’, in National Archives (UK), KV3/17; Coates and Coates, *History of Anglo-Soviet Relations*, pp. 268-9; Extract from a Statement issued by the Soviet Embassy in London, May 15 1927 as quoted in *ibid.*, p. 270; Anglo-Russian Parliamentary Committee, *Raid on Arcos Ltd and the Trade Delegation of the USSR* (London, 1927), p. 50. *Sunday Express*, 29 May 1927 as quoted in Coates and Coates, *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations*, p. 285; Lih et al. (eds), *Stalin’s Letters to Molotov*, pp. 133-5.

having done irrevocable harm to the credibility of Soviet desires for stability on the world stage in British eyes.

The Comintern always had a troubled relationship with Britain. While some of this had to do with the British Government's perception of the threat to Britain and her Empire posed by the Comintern, many of the problems stemmed from a lack cross-cultural understanding. It is clear that the Comintern as a Soviet-dominated body did not fully understand the national situation in Britain, or appreciate the nature of the CPGB. The CPGB was too different from the Comintern's conception of a bolshevized party, and in some sense restricted by working within the structures of British parliamentary democracy. British communists were viewed as tainted by a social-democratic past, but they themselves did not always appreciate the Comintern's wider plans for world revolution, or some of the ways in which the Comintern attempted to communicate with and shape the CPGB.

British historians have not done much to bridge the gap, and in some cases display similar cross-cultural misunderstanding. Some aspects of the Comintern in relation to Britain have been overemphasized or ignored, and there is a general lack of appreciation of the Comintern as a Soviet institution. In part, there is an issue with the way in which historians have approached the Comintern from a British perspective. Overwhelmingly they have attempted to deal with the CPGB and then the Comintern, with little work from the other direction. This stems from historians engaging with the Comintern through national, rather than international, history frequently without a framework for comparison with other national parties. National archives have formed the main focus for research, and central Comintern documents are largely restricted in the scope of their usage, and do not take into account the broader picture of the Comintern. Some of this clearly stems from a lack of command of Russian, or other languages, coupled to an assumption that the translation of Comintern documents into English is accurate. A full source base to approach the Comintern remains inaccessible to many British researchers, and they have used what they can.

Ultimately, when viewed through a British lens one gets a distorted view of the Comintern. The history of the British communist movement in relation to the

Comintern can only reveal part of the picture. We would be wrong to damn British Historians for their views of the Comintern, however they have been coloured, and instead take steps to amalgamate transnational historical research towards analyzing the Comintern in full, at both international and national levels. This is a complex and sizeable undertaking, requiring differing approaches and skills, alongside an acceptance that each historian may bring their own predispositions and cross-cultural misunderstandings to Comintern history. British views of the Comintern find their place in a broader context, and although more comparative work remains to be done, they form a part of what may evolve into a more complete history of the Comintern in the context of an overarching institution and treating its member parties as distinct entities.