

1920-2020: 100 Years of U.S. Communism

Friday 3 January 2020, by [WALD Alan](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2020).

THE COMMUNIST TRADITION in the United States needs a better publicist. The year 2019 was the 100th anniversary of the movement's founding; the idea of socialism is urgently in the air, thanks in part to Bernie, while splendid new books about Karl Marx are popping up like spring flowers. And yet the riddle of Communism, its amalgam of earnest commitment to social justice and Soviet-centered realpolitik, remains as disquieting as ever.

Contents

- [Renegotiating the Past](#)
- [The Future Arrives](#)
- [Bolsheviks Behaving Badly](#)
- [Reductio Ad Stalinism?](#)
- [Anticipating the Past](#)

Who among us has the qualifications to accurately mine the tragic, comic, and complex forces that coincided to create this beguiling, contradictory and elusive movement?

Those who truly care about rebuilding a Far Left — this time with a vibrant and intellectually heterodox spirit — have many complaints about partisans of the CP-USA.

There is no way to un-see what has been witnessed and documented. Over the decades, sundry of its leaders, members and sympathizers have consistently lowballed the party's truly insidious and troubling chapters. The CP-USA seems a movement incapable of fearlessly investigating and coming to terms with aspects of its own identity or even to attain the degree of critical self-assessment achieved by several of the Italian and Spanish Eurocommunists of the 1970s.

The CP-USA is noteworthy for regularly publishing autobiographical and biographical books and pamphlets about its cadre. Yet too many read as if scripted in medieval times, when the primary motivation was religious and the object was to hold up examples of the subject's discovering and then living the godly life while instructing and inspiring.

Communist life-writing may be too serious a matter to be left to Communists. The most outstanding, such as Martin Duberman's 1995 biography of concert artist Paul Robeson, tend to be authored by sympathetic non-Communists.

Nonetheless, certain achievements of the CP-USA remain a reservoir of hope that nourishes us to meet the daunting challenges of the Trump era. At its 100th anniversary, there may be more to praise than bury.

Renegotiating the Past

Reading about the movement's contributions to anti-racism, anti-fascism, industrial unionism and

working-class culture might cause an envy meltdown. Whether one is pro-Communist or not, memories of the Scottsboro Case, Abraham Lincoln Brigade, talented writers promoted by the John Reed Club and attracted to the League of American Writers, and devoted builders of the CIO will be part of a Red DNA of any future Far Left.

These histories touch moral chords and offer strategic lessons whose echoes inspire us to fight for a new and improved society.

Meanwhile, much of the population remains mired in a surfeit of recycled memes generated by hitmen of the political Right to slime the memory of U.S. Bolsheviks and anyone who can be linked to them. These are often scare images of Communists as saboteurs, blinkered dupes, or useful idiots on behalf of an Evil Empire.

To escape any taint of such FOX News caricatures of Communism, some who champion socialism in the new millennium protest too much that a modern reincarnation would be simply the New Deal Redivivus. This type of “Santa Clausification” of Marx would surely have astonished Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who sought to save capitalism from itself.

Others, especially in cultural studies, reinvent the “Red Decade” of the 1930s as principally a warm and fuzzy version of the Popular Front while barely referencing the reign of terror in the USSR from which it was substantially meant to divert.

They deploy euphemisms, designed for readers distracted by shiny things, which downplay the full metamorphosis of the CP-USA in the mid-1930s, when membership shot up to 60,000 or so and went even higher during World War II. This is akin to recounting the story of Catholicism while not bothering with the Inquisition and pedophile priests, or at least playing them down as one-off bizarre episodes.

Working people of all colors were drawn to the movement less by ideology than the extraordinary activism of its cadres, but ultimately found themselves operating in a framework where every national policy switch emanated from the far-away Stalin leadership.

After all, at the command of Moscow, the Party switched from the extreme of designating Roosevelt a “fascist” to an overwhelming support, and concurrently transmuted its opposition to fascism from an anti-capitalist basis to an alliance with the leaders of Western imperialism. The approach to fighting racism was also reconfigured by 1937 as the CP-USA newly embraced an “Americanism” with George Washington as “Father of his country.”

The Communist tendency toward a selective empathy — compassion toward populations assumed to be on one’s own team; obliviousness to the mass suffering of those alleged to “objectively” assist opposing forces — became a permanent fixture with the Great Purge (which especially targeted Soviet Communists, Red Army leaders and wealthier peasants).

Should one laugh or snort? In fairness, the CP-USA on its own began to address problems in its ultra-sectarianism by 1934, an unusual moment when the international Communist movement was in disarray after the unexpected triumph of Hitler.

One example was a turn to united front type labor politics with workers in the Socialist Party and other radicals, which turned out to be crucial in the success of the Congress of industrial Organizations (CIO) after 1935.

The jettisoning of many other older positions during the Popular Front was an improvement; yet certain of the adroitly-crafted stories acclaiming the new orientation as a model for radicals need to

be untold and re-explained in multiple dimensions.

It's the dumbed down versions of the Popular Front, Left and Right, that make the CP-USA the ideal subject for romanticization, defamation, manifold contending exegeses, obfuscation, and memoirs that rely on score-settling or jumbled recollection.

No wonder that Communist-curious young radicals may feel trapped between nostalgia for something that never was and perplexity over a debate that never ceases.

If we are to decisively unfable Communism, the murky jungle that is the history of the U.S. Left requires an analytical understanding of the place of the CP-USA in our ancestry — to be approached not as armchair exegetes but as committed militants. Even if one concludes that its history is one of necessary failures, our search for a pattern continues: What is our path to a better world?

The Future Arrives

One hundred years ago, in September 1919, the electrifying impact of the October Revolution was organizationally kick-started by pro-Bolshevik components of the U.S. Left. The future of American radicalism arrived when two factions purged by the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party of America laid down the organizational foundation for the Communist movement in simultaneously held gatherings in Chicago.

The result, however, was more a hot mess than the effective launch of a revolutionary movement — let alone a demonic conspiracy of “outside agitators.” The 1981 movie *Reds*, with its sublime portrayal of revolutionary journalist John Reed by actor Warren Beatty, offers a sense of the over-heated, bare-knuckle debates that roiled the atmosphere.

Claiming some 50-60,000 total adherents, one of these two radical blocs called itself the Communist Party of America and the other the Communist Labor Party. Both had comprised a Left wing inside the Socialists, aspiring to membership in the newly-formed Third International, or Comintern, based in the USSR; but there had been a schism over how long to remain inside the old organization.

At this point, they were outside and operating “underground” — illegally and with pseudonyms. Yet it took nearly two years, and the formation of a transitional United Communist Party, to come together as a new Communist Party of America in May 1921.

Some have argued that this later event was the true founding of the Communist Party, a claim somewhat undercut by the fact that in November 1921 there was another schism, hyper-factionalized and brawling as was now customary. This time the rupture was over the question of whether to launch an “above-ground,” legal party with a public leadership using actual names.

For some months there existed two organizations with identical designations for their parties and journals. This was not a good start, comrades.

In spite of that, looking back on the 1920s reveals several features that should be remembered for any factually grounded understanding of the roots of U.S. Communism. First of all, the initial decade was one of considerable self-sufficiency on the part of U.S. Communists as they balked at various recommendations of the distant Comintern. They even choose a rather independent national leadership, headed by Jay Lovestone, which sympathized more with the trend led by Nikolai Bukharin than that of Stalin.

Second, the interventions coming from abroad were often more salutary to the building of an indigenous revolutionary movement than the views of the national party, which was substantially foreign-born and hardly free of earlier traditions of industrial syndicalism.

For example, at the urging of the Comintern the U.S. party shifted wholly to a legal status; “Americanized” its members by promoting English-language publications; stepped into a vanguard role as an integrated, multi-racial organization; and dropped its sectarian refusal to have any truck with the American Federation of Labor.

Yet the culmination of the 1920s was a devastating makeover, one marking the beginning of the end for the utility of the CP-USA as a primary instrument in the United States for the liberation of working people.

In 1929, the triumphant Stalin leadership purged Bukharin from the Soviet Politburo and then lopped off the pro-Bukharin leaders of the CP-USA (who had themselves just purged the Trotskyists led by James P. Cannon, Max Shachtman, and Antoinette Konikow). Earl Browder and William Z. Foster were installed instead as party leaders.

The nature of the Comintern’s intercessions also went increasingly haywire as U.S. Communists, guided by Moscow’s new “Third Period” policy, launched dual “Red” unions against the existing ones; declared their socialist rivals to be “social fascist”; developed the mechanical view that African Americans in the South had already opted for a Black Republic; and saw the New Deal as a Mussolini-type operation.

Bolsheviks Behaving Badly

Granting that the internal factionalism of the 1920s had been often debilitating, the transformation of the Party into a near politically monolithic entity intolerant of diverse views would eventually prove lethal. Rank and file agency and creativity certainly existed in many areas on a local level, but the leadership was an elite club.

This renovation was part and parcel of the process in which Stalin’s Caligula-like leadership of the Soviet Union, and hence the Comintern, progressively ranked the needs of the soviet bureaucracy over the world revolutionary movement.

For the following decades, the rest of the Left would be stunned as contradictory policies were announced by Moscow and followed by the CP-USA with head-snapping regularity. The party membership and hundreds of thousands of sympathizers were far too trusting of the leadership.

No doubt the fog of battle obscured their vision, inasmuch as they were habitually embroiled in current struggles, almost always in the midst of action. It was as if the preservation of the selfless idealism that drew most of them to the movement required not knowing the truth.

Although Father Figures have fallen out of fashion, and Founding Mothers are scarce in CP-USA history, it is not uncommon to see Earl Browder cited as having the most recoverable record for those wishing to rehabilitate U.S. Communism.

Indeed the reformers of 1956, who sought to make the CP-USA independent of the Soviet Union and less sectarian, in the wake of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s speech disclosing some of Stalin’s crimes, were called “neo-Browderites.”

Today, varieties of Browder's strategy of socialists (and the CP-USA) backing "progressive Democrats" are certainly hegemonic. Yet Browder's legacy is as problematic as they come.

Starting in 1930, Browder consolidated his top leadership — with assistance from Moscow — for a 15-year run. During this stint he became better known for his public persona than his publications. A brazen author of his own mythology, he increasingly emphasized his native roots with a Kansas twang, family history of 100 years of residency in the United States and extensive patriotic military service, and a superficial knowledge of national history.

Thus Browder cemented an image of U.S. Communism, with himself as avatar, as an American nationalism, on the psyches of tens of thousands of readers and listeners. Clandestinely, however, he operated as a recruiter for Soviet espionage and nourished an extraordinary expansion of ego.

With the atomic success of the Popular Front, Browder amplified his tendency toward grandiose pronouncements. Soon he became a masterful chest-thumper orchestrating big performances among huge crowds. Revealing an almost messianic side, and regarded by some as "the greatest living American," he sought to transfer his fandom into a form of mass obedience.

What could possibly go wrong? In 1939, six weeks before the appalling Hitler-Stalin Pact, he confidently announced to the world that "there is as much chance of agreement [between the USSR and Nazi Germany] as of Earl Browder being elected president of the Chamber of Commerce." Hubris, thy name is Browder!

The CP-USA response to the Pact, of course, was an object lesson in dishonor. Once again following the Comintern lead, anti-fascist political work was instantly jettisoned. The American League for Peace and Democracy, the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, and other groups were closed down, while the American Student Union and National Negro Congress suffered splits.

Throughout the world, the exodus from party membership was larger than any time before the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary; it would have been even more had the secret clauses in the Pact been known.

Although Nazism during World War II, with its genocidal murders, visited greater horrors on humanity than did the USSR, the fawning sycophancy of Browder and others rationalized or simply covered up unconscionable actions. These include the Soviet deliveries of needed oil to Germany, Stalin's handing over to Hitler a substantial number of German Communists who had taken refuge in the USSR, and the shooting of thousands of Polish army officers by the Soviet secret police in the Katyn Forest.

Within a few years came a stunning twist in Browder's career. He moved from CP-USA savior, and even martyr (in 1941 he had served a 14-month prison sentence for passport fraud), to charlatan.

Obsessed with out-doing all competitors in his devotion to wartime Popular Front unity authorized by Stalin, Browder envisioned a postwar world of peaceful coexistence. Hence he reconfigured the CP-USA as an organized pressure group within the framework of domestic capitalism, establishing the Communist Political Association (CPA) in 1944.

Unluckily, the Soviet leadership was now seeing the future very differently and, in the spring of 1945, as World War II was ending, "Browderism" began to be denounced by Communists abroad as a dangerous revisionism. He was quickly replaced by Foster as party leader and expelled in early 1946.

The Cold War political persecution of the party that followed, coupled with further splits, crises,

repression, and revelations in the international Communist movement following Stalin's death, set the stage for the decline of the CP-USA as a major force.

Reductio Ad Stalinism?

Nevertheless, every misdeed of the CP-USA leadership should not be approached as a predetermined and conspiratorial manifestation of "Stalinism." In fact, this kind of thinking about the CP-USA, which became increasingly addictive during the Cold War, should be buried with a stake in its heart.

In truth, many sins attributed to the CP-USA, even if accurate, are common to all manner of political organizations and movements. For instance, blind fealty to an authoritative leader is hardly an unusual aspect of political life — among Trotskyists and social democrats on the Left, Democrats in the Center, and Republicans on the Right.

In the United States today selective empathy, especially when it comes to the treatment of immigrants and people of color, is practically a way of life. Versions of "the ends justify the means" are standard operating procedure among everyone, except, perhaps, pacifist absolutists. The heartbreak for Marxists is that Communists avow that they are internationalists, scientific, and against all forms of exploitation and oppression.

To be sure, careful definitions of Stalinism by those referring to unique policies and practices of the Soviet bloc — whether classical ideas of Trotsky, who saw Stalinism as a symptom of the problem, or later ones by E. P. Thompson (*New Reasoner*, 1957) and Joe Slovo (*Why Socialism Failed*, 1989) — are indispensable.

Loose talk, or talking political smack, frequently leads to insisting on likenesses with fascism, especially Nazism, and expressions like "Red Fascism" and the "two totalitarian regimes." This is more insult taxonomy than weighty critique, but there is a sad truth to such catch-phrases — once they stick, they stick.

Of course, there are certainly points of comparison of Stalinism and Hitlerism in terms of millions killed, tortured and imprisoned; yet the deeper one goes in any comparative effort, the more one is struck by distinctions in ideology, economy, and the motives and ideals of the supporters.

Moreover, Communism out of power is hardly the same as Communism in power. In the United States, Communists, especially in the McCarthy era, were the victims of disgraceful political repression, not its perpetrators. And just because Communist culture may have commonalities even when existing in dissimilar national environments, it does not follow that the same results will be produced — unless one operates in a context-free world. The overwhelming majority of U.S. Communists broke with Stalinism when they realized what it was.

Beyond this, there is the problem of conflating Communism (in this context, Soviet-style Marxism) with communism (the broader doctrine, subscribed to by Bukharinists, Trotskyists, Council Communists and other heretics). This is an instance where the correct words and definitions are the foundation of a serious discussion.

Conflating large "C" Communism with small "c" communism assists in obfuscating that there was always a manifestation of Marxist resistance to both capitalism and Stalinism.

In this respect there is much to be learned from Trotskyists and those who would not accept the

binary narrative of “campism,” a term for the view that the world divided into power blocs among which one must choose.

Sadly the broader, non-party, anti-Stalinist Left (Sidney Hook, Partisan Review, and so on), emerging in the late 1930s, vacated its chance to be the critical conscience of the world. Too many participants evolved into one-trick ponies banging on about Stalinist perfidy as they progressively accommodated to what they euphemistically called “The West” or “The Free World.”

Stalinism cannot be the center of every discussion of the CP-USA, even as it cannot be banished to the sidelines.

Anticipating the Past

One hundred years on, the legacy of the CP-USA is something of a Rohrshach Test for those of us trying to make sense of its history for the future of socialism in the United States. 21st Century Socialism has many choices as to how to interpret and respond to this experience. It is hardly irrational to have some degree of worry about the recurrence of something like Stalinism, generated by the defeat of social revolutions that were once justified and inspiring.

But from what point do we open this oyster? Attempts to rationalize and apologize for what went before mean a distortion, and distorting the past leads to distortions of the present and sows confusion about what one may actually face.

New biographies of Stalin are claiming that he was actually a greater historical leader than Trotsky and others recognized; that may be true, but there is no evidence to challenge the fact that he was simultaneously a great historical criminal who soured the idea of socialism in the mouths of millions of working people.

The Left has no need for our own equivalent of charlatans who believe that NASA faked the moon landing or our counterpart of holocaust-denying David Irving, “disproving” the horrors of Stalin and Mao. To know the reality is to ascertain the boundaries of possibility; to sidestep it is to guarantee that the mistakes of Communism will keep returning as the worst buzzkill of our time.

Although we should not judge the CP-USA only for what it did in its most awful moments, we are not talking merely of some dark chapters in the life of the Left but of permanent losses of credibility and authority that are irreparable.

Certain wounds just take a long time to heal but with CP-USA there is no way to reverse the decades of damage. The CP-USA exists today as a few thousand capable people, with a newspaper about as rousing as a half-flat cocktail.

Even as we are living in the moment of a reboot and revival craze, I see no likely future for its reawakening, not even a kind of Rolling Stones performance where Mick Jagger imitates the moves of a rocker one-third his age. Although U.S. Communists thought they were making history, they turned out to be on the receiving end.

That phase of radical history associated with derivatives of the model of October 1917 seems quite over. Nevertheless, there does remain one pesky matter: the injustices still persist — some are worse — that have driven people to revolutionary Marxist answers in the past.

Yearnings for social emancipation don’t come with time stamps and the future is always just beyond

the present. What is likely, however, is that 21st century socialism faces not repetitions but permutations and metamorphoses, since radicalism is a story that never ends.

Alan Wald

Bibliography

As the above essay argues, the 100-year history of the CP-USA resists easy summary. There is no single book, and certainly no short piece of writing, that can do maximum justice to its scope and complexity, let alone provide a political perspective satisfactory to every reader. Nevertheless, I particularly recommend two essays that stand out for rigor, creativity, and Marxist political acuity: Charles Post, "The Popular Front: Rethinking CPUSA History," *Against the Current* #63 (July-August 1996), on-line at Solidarity and ESSF (article 51698), [United States – The Popular Front: Rethinking CPUSA History](#); and Bryan Palmer, "Rethinking the Historiography of US Communism," *American Communist History* 2, no. 2 (2003): 139-73.

Otherwise, the classic study of the 1920s is the two-volume work by Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (1957) and *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (1960). The CP-USA in the 1930s is treated from an institutional perspective by Harvey Klehr in *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (1984). In contrast, the CP-USA in the 1940s is treated as a social movement by Maurice Isserman in *Which Side Were You: The American Communist Party During World War II* (1982). The costs of Cold War repression is the subject of Ellen Schrecker's *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (1998). An exemplary local history is Randi Storch's *Red Chicago: American Communism at its Grassroots* (2008). A reinterpretation of the CP-USA's entire record is featured in Paul Buhle's *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the American Left* (Revised and Expanded Edition, 2013).

The breadth of the social and cultural movements in which the CP-USA played a leadership role has produced an enormous library of outstanding studies. A few of the works representing a range of topics are Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (1990); Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict That Shaped American Unions* (1977); Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (2002); Enrique M. Bueina, *Chicano Communists and the Struggle for Social Justice* (2019); Robbie Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-1950* (1990); Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (1990); Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-56* (2002); Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-41* (1993); James Smethurst, *The New Red Negro: The American Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946* (1999). *American Communist History* is a tri-annual peer-reviewed academic journal that is presently the leading resource for the latest scholarship.

P.S.

- *Against the Current* n° 204, January-February 2020: