The Comintern

Also by Kevin McDermott

THE CZECH RED UNIONS, 1918–1929

THE COMINTERN

A History of International Communism from
Lenin to Stalin

Kevin McDermott and
Jeremy Agnew

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First published 1996 by
MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 978-0-333-55284-1 ISBN 978-1-349-25024-0 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-25024-0

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
05	04	03	02	01	00	99	98	97	96

To our parents

Lucy Agnew, 1923–94
William Agnew, 1921–91

and

Vera McDermott, 1923–83
Walter Henry McDermott, 1915–91

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Acknowledgements

We accumulated many debts during the five years this book was in the making. We are most grateful to Dr Michael Weiner, Director of the East Asia Research Centre, University of Sheffield, for contributing Chapter 5 on 'Comintern in East Asia, 1919–39'. Very special thanks go to Monty Johnstone, whose unwavering enthusiasm and trenchant criticisms of the manuscript were invaluable. He also kindly provided much vital source material. Dr Aleksandr Vatlin of the Institute for Human Rights and Democracy, Moscow, gave us the benefit of his impeccable knowledge of the Comintern and its massive archive. Professor Gregor Benton of the University of Leeds reviewed the chapter on East Asia. Professor Aldo Agosti of Turin University, Professor Serge Wolikow of the University of Bourgogne, Dr Brigitte Studer of Lausanne University, Dr Peter Huber, Dr Silvio Pons, Dr Kimmo Rentola and Dr Tauno Saarela generously supplied us with copies of their own work on the international communist movement. This book would have been the poorer without the inspiration, comments and advice of these experts. Needless to say, any mistakes and shortcomings remain our own.

Kevin McDermott would like to thank: the School of Cultural Studies at Sheffield Hallam University and the British Academy for funding research trips to the Comintern Archive in August–September 1991 and April 1992 respectively; the archivists at the Russian Centre for the Preservation and Study of Contemporary Historical Documents, Moscow; the Inter-Library Loan staff of Psalter Lane Library, Sheffield Hallam University; George Matthews and Francis King, formerly of the Library and Archive of the Communist Party of Great Britain; and my colleagues David Mayall, Mike Cronin and

Ian Ramage. My deepest gratitude is to Susan Reid for her constant inspiration and intellectual support.

Jeremy Agnew would like to acknowledge some long-standing debts: to Alan MacDougall and Dr Barry Smart for their friendship and 'wise counsels'; to Harry and Ben – 'a sprig of fine white heather in their future lapels'; finally, to Daryl, 'summa cum gratia'.

We also wish to thank our editors at Macmillan, Simon Winder, Pauline Underwood and Vanessa Graham for their encouragement, patience and guidance.

An earlier version of the section 'Comintern and the Terror' appeared as 'Stalinist Terror in the Comintern: New Perspectives', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 30, no. 1 (1995). The first two sections of chapter 3 were published, slightly amended, under the title 'Stalin and the Comintern during the "Third Period", 1928–33', *European History Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 3 (1995). Parts of Chapter 4 were published in much condensed form as 'Stalin, the Comintern and European Communism, 1934–39', *Modern History Review*, vol. 7, no. 3 (1996). We thank the publishers for granting permission to reprint them here.

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Cambridge University Press, for the extracts from J. Haslam 'The Comintern and the Origins of the Popular Front, 1934–1935', *Historical Journal*, 22 (1979);

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Lawrence & Wishart, for the extracts from G. Dimitrov, *The Working Class against Facism* (1935); and *About Turn: The British Communist Party and the Second World War*, ed. F. King and G. Matthews, (1990) pp. 69–70.

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Sheffield

KEVIN McDERMOTT
JEREMY AGNEW

List of Abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
Cominform	Communist Information Bureau
Comintern	Communist (Third) International
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CPUSA	Communist Party of the United States of America
ECCI	Executive Committee of the Communist International
ICC	International Control Commission
IFTU	International Federation of Trade Unions (‘Amsterdam’)
ILP	Independent Labour Party
JCP	Japanese Communist Party
KAPD	German Communist Workers’ Party
KCP	Korean Communist Party
KPD	German Communist Party
KPJ	Yugoslav Communist Party
KPP	Polish Communist Party
KŠČ	Communist Party of Czechoslovakia
Narkomindel	People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs
NEP	New Economic Policy
NKVD	People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs
NMM	National Minority Movement
NSDAP	National Socialist German Workers’ Party (Nazi)
NUWM	National Unemployed Workers’ Movement
OMS	Department of International Communication
PCE	Spanish Communist Party

PCF	French Communist Party
PCI	Italian Communist Party
Politburo	Political Bureau (of the Russian Communist Party)
POUM	Workers' Party of Marxist Unity (Spain)
Profintern	Red International of Labour Unions (RILU)
RCP (or CPSU)	Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)
RCPSCHD	Russian Centre for the Preservation and Study of Contemporary Historical Documents (former Central Party Archive)
RGO	Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition (Germany)
RILU	<i>see</i> Profintern
SFIO	French Socialist Party
SPD	German Social Democratic Party
USPD	German Independent Social Democratic Party
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union)
f.	<i>fond</i> (collection)
op.	<i>opis</i> (inventory)
d.	<i>delo</i> (file)
l.	<i>list</i> (folio)

Dates of Comintern Congresses and ECCI Plena

WORLD CONGRESSES

First Congress, Moscow	2–6 March 1919
Second Congress, Petrograd and Moscow	19 July–7 August 1920
Third Congress, Moscow	22 June–12 July 1921
Fourth Congress, Petrograd and Moscow	5 November–5 December 1922
Fifth Congress, Moscow	17 June–8 July 1924
Sixth Congress, Moscow	17 July–1 September 1928
Seventh Congress, Moscow	25 July–21 August 1935

PLENA OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL

First Enlarged Plenum	24 February–4 March 1922
Second Enlarged Plenum	7–11 June 1922
Third Enlarged Plenum	12–23 June 1923
Fourth Enlarged Plenum	12–13 July 1924
Fifth Enlarged Plenum	21 March–6 April 1925
Sixth Enlarged Plenum	17 February–15 March 1926

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Seventh Enlarged Plenum	22 November–16 December 1926
Eighth Plenum	18–30 May 1927
Ninth Plenum	9–25 February 1928
Tenth Plenum	3–19 July 1929
Eleventh Plenum	26 March–11 April 1931
Twelfth Plenum	27 August–15 September 1932
Thirteenth Plenum	28 November–12 December 1933

Introduction

In the opinion of almost all observers the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the USSR in the late 1980s and early 1990s consigned the Marxist–Leninist ideology to the dustbin of history. If that be the case, the question inevitably arises why we should wish to write a book on the Comintern, an organisation that was explicitly dedicated to the propagation of that self-same failed ideology. There are three very good answers. First, the Comintern was a significant force in inter-war world politics, able to command the loyalty of millions of militants and sympathisers who, rightly or wrongly, regarded the Soviet Union as the beacon of humanity. The growth of international communism alarmed capitalist governments from London to Washington to Tokyo. It may seem strange to readers in the 1990s, but the ‘spectre of communism’ appeared to be stalking the globe in the 1920s and 1930s.

Secondly, the advent of *glasnost* in the Gorbachev era and the opening of the former Soviet Central Party Archive in Moscow have greatly enlarged the historiographical and documentary base for the study of the Comintern. In the mid-1960s two eminent scholars bemoaned the fact that the bulk of Comintern source material remained secret, submerged like an ‘iceberg’.¹ Recently, sizeable chunks of that iceberg have begun to melt and as a result we now know far more about the inner workings of the Comintern than we did even five or six years ago. There is, of course, still much to be done. Reconstructing the history of the Comintern is notoriously difficult, but academics from all over Europe and beyond are avidly engaged in archival research in Russia and in East–West collabora-

tive projects. Already their labours are beginning to bear fruit.² In short, it is an exciting time to investigate one of the most controversial aspects of Soviet and world history.

Finally, no readily available one-volume history of the Comintern exists in the English language. Our aim has been to write a general, accessible and up-to-date text, one that attempts to analyse the findings of both Russian and Western experts while simultaneously incorporating elements of original research. The book thus adopts an overtly historiographical approach, introducing students to the main issues in, and interpretations of, Comintern history. These issues are further illuminated by a concise documentary section which draws on old and new sources.³ The work is directed primarily at an undergraduate audience, but we hope that specialists will find our arguments interesting and challenging.

The Comintern, or Communist International, is also known as the Third International because in many respects it was the direct descendant of the First and Second Internationals. The First was established in 1864 by Karl Marx and a motley amalgam of French and British labour leaders as an agency to coordinate the proletariat in its historic worldwide struggle against capitalism. For Marx and Engels, capital's insatiable hunger for ever-expanding markets broke down national barriers, undermining the bases of nationalism. In this process, modern industrial labour, 'the same in England as in France, in America as in Germany, has stripped him [the worker] of every trace of national character. . . . The working men have no country.'⁴ Horizontal *class* allegiance was gradually superseding vertical *national* divisions. In the Marxist schema, international capitalism and the bourgeois state would inevitably be overthrown by national working-class detachments acting under the auspices of the International in the common interests of the exploited proletariat. The effective collapse of the First International in 1872, victim of an acrimonious split between the Marxists and the anarchist Bakuninists, did not prevent the concept of 'proletarian internationalism' from becoming a mainstay of the revolutionary working-class movement: 'workers of the world, unite!' Nevertheless, the tension between national sentiment and internationalist aspiration was never resolved in socialist theory or practice and was to haunt all three Internationals.⁵

The Second International was created in 1889 and, like its predecessor, was from its inception a fractious coalition of reformist

and revolutionary tendencies. The principal parties in the International were the German Social Democrats (SPD) and the French Socialists (SFIO). The founders adopted a decentralised organisational structure with no binding disciplinary procedures or programmatic and tactical mandates. This made the International little more than a loose federation of autonomous parties with strictly limited scope for unified action. Ideological schisms also sapped its vitality. The European socialist movement in the period before 1914 comprised 'left', 'right' and 'centrist' factions divided in their attitudes to bourgeois democracy, the national question, the general strike and, most importantly, war. Internally weakened, the Second International foundered in August 1914 on the rock of national chauvinism. In Lenin's eyes, the vote in favour of war credits by German, French and British labour leaders signified a 'sheer betrayal of socialism' and the 'ideological and political bankruptcy of the International'. Already by the autumn of 1914 he had announced as his battlecry: 'The Second International is dead . . . long live the Third International.'⁶ During the war, the minority intransigent revolutionaries gradually coalesced around the Russian Bolsheviks, forming the so-called Zimmerwald Left. Lenin's demand to turn the international war into a revolutionary civil war and his implacable hostility to parliamentary democracy gave rise to fierce debates with the majority socialists.

The October Revolution of 1917 represented for Lenin the first act of a global drama. The Russian working class had fulfilled its historical obligation and European workers would surely follow. However, for the goal of world revolution to become a reality a new International, purged of reformist 'traitors', was deemed an absolute necessity. Accordingly, in March 1919 the Communist International was founded at a congress of revolutionaries in Moscow. Its mission was no less than to build a 'world party' of communists dedicated to the armed overthrow of capitalist private property and its replacement by a system of collective ownership and production. At the time this did not seem utopian. 'Total War' between 1914 and 1918 had, it was believed, irredeemably undermined the nineteenth-century old order. In the opinion of many, and not just on the left, it was doomed. The 'Age of Catastrophe' had begun and the alternative appeared to be socialism.⁷ Yet, with the sole exception of Mongolia, the Comintern's mission remained unfulfilled during its lifetime, 1919–43. Rather than becoming a fomentor and organiser of world

socialist revolution, the International turned into a compliant instrument of the Soviet state. The core of this book is devoted to unravelling the whole complex of factors behind this unintended outcome.

What are the major issues and controversies in Comintern history? There is no overall consensus on this question, but we can isolate several recurrent themes that have attracted scholars for many decades. First, continuities and discontinuities between the Leninist and Stalinist regimes in the Comintern: was the latter the logical outcome of the former? Secondly, relations between the central Comintern authorities in Moscow and the national communist parties: was the highly centralist Bolshevik model universalised or did the parties retain a measure of autonomy? Thirdly, the relationship between the Comintern and official Soviet foreign policy: was the International merely an instrument of the Soviet state? And, finally, the crucial issue of the attitudes adopted by communists towards the social democrats: how to win over a majority of the organised working class for revolutionary perspectives in an essentially non-revolutionary era? These four themes constitute the basic framework of this text.

However, each broad theme conceals a multitude of more detailed and problematic questions. At what level of analysis should a general history of power relations in the Comintern be focused? There were at least three hierarchical layers of influence in the international communist movement: the Soviet leadership's 'control' over the Comintern's Executive Committee (ECCI) in Moscow; the ECCI's 'control' over the national party leaderships; and the latter's 'control' over the party rank and file. Was this a one-way relationship with all the orders emanating from the central authorities, as most historians have assumed, or was there scope for interaction between the various proactive and reactive elements? A related moot point is whether communist parties faithfully carried out the directives coming from Moscow. As Alexander Dallin wrote over twenty years ago in connection with Soviet internal affairs: 'in general, the concern among Western scholars with decision-making may well have contributed to a neglect of the extent to which a policy can be subverted in the process of its implementation'.⁸ To what degree can this dictum be applied to the Comintern? How far were central directives reinterpreted, adapted or subverted to suit local conditions? This line of inquiry necessarily forces us to reconsider the exact nature of the

Comintern. Should it be narrowly defined as the 'headquarters of the world revolution' situated in some shabby offices in Moscow and hence subject to close scrutiny by the Bolsheviks? Or should it be regarded more broadly as an international body operating on a worldwide scale and thus open to all manner of influences outside the direct control of the Russians?

In this unresolved debate between what can be termed history 'from above' and 'from below', we incline to the former. Not only because our focus is on the 'centre' – we are, after all, writing a history of the headquarters of the revolution, not of individual communist parties in all their diversity and complexity – but also because the Comintern and foreign communists *did* succumb to the dictates of the Stalinists, and *did* loyally trumpet the glories of the USSR. Any history of the Comintern cannot but fail to take this fully into account. However, an essential component of our methodology is a recognition that the inter-war communist experience should not be reduced to the crude equation 'communist party = Comintern = agent of Moscow'. Hence, we attempt to integrate into our narrative recent research which places communist activity firmly in its national, as well as international, context and which analyses the *interaction* between centre and periphery.

The periodisation of the Comintern is problematic and still the subject of much debate. The most common model posits five broad, often overlapping, phases:

- (i) **1919–23:** a period of abortive revolutionary upheavals, the formation and organisational consolidation of communist parties and the continued isolation of Soviet Russia;
- (ii) **1924–8:** years of 'relative capitalist stabilisation', united front tactics and the beginning of the 'Bolshevisation' of the Comintern as Soviet inner-party struggles enter the international field;
- (iii) **1928–33:** the so-called 'Third Period' of capitalist crisis, working-class radicalisation, 'ultra-leftist' attacks on social democracy and emergent 'Stalinisation';
- (iv) **1934–9:** the Popular Front era of cross-class anti-fascist alliances and limited defence of bourgeois democracy, juxtaposed with the demands of Soviet diplomacy and the onslaught of the Stalinist Terror;
- (v) **1939–43:** the ultimate degeneration of the Comintern into an instrument of Soviet foreign policy, epitomised by the Nazi–

Soviet Pact and Stalin's dissolution of the International in May-June 1943.

This periodisation is convenient, but inevitably simplistic in that it ignores variants within each phase. By emphasising Soviet and international factors, it tends to neglect the indigenous conditions which may have influenced the changing tactics of the communist parties. One of our main tasks is to chart and explain the legendary zigzags from 'left' to 'right' in Comintern strategies and tactics. It is our contention that the prime motivation for change came from Moscow, but that national parties, particularly in the 1920s, enjoyed a degree of latitude to adapt the 'line' to suit local conditions. Put simply, strategy was defined in Moscow, but tactics, to a certain extent, could be elaborated on the ground by the parties themselves. This relative autonomy of non-Soviet communists was drastically, though not totally, emasculated in the Stalinist period when rigid ideological conformity, theoretical ossification and bureaucratic centralism became the hallmarks of the international communist movement.

The historiography of the Comintern is diverse and of varying standard. A Dutch expert has recently discerned four main genres: the 'dissident communist' critique; the 'anti-communist' interpretation dominant during the early Cold War; the 'official' communist literature; and the more 'scientific' scholarly studies undertaken since the 1960s.⁹ Authors in the first three categories usually had overt political axes to grind, either of an anti- or pro-communist nature, which tended to lessen the value of much of their work. Nevertheless, many of these studies offer important insights into the activities of the International and its constituent national communist parties (known in Comintern parlance as 'sections'). The early account by the German ex-communist Franz Borkenau has survived the test of time and remains a useful volume for students of the Comintern.¹⁰ The Trotskyist critique of the Stalinised International as a bureaucratic caricature of the fundamentally healthy and democratic Leninist Comintern is best conveyed in the work of Lev Davidovich himself,¹¹ although Isaac Deutscher's thoughts on the Comintern are still well worth consulting.¹² The most recent survey from this perspective is Duncan Hallas's text, a disappointing offering which at times descends into an unsubtle rehearsal of vulgar Trotskyist schemas.¹³

The two most authoritative Western Comintern scholars are arguably E. H. Carr, the renowned British historian, and Fernando Claudin, a former Spanish communist and 'dissident' Marxist. Regrettably, Carr never composed a one-volume history of the Comintern, but this organisation figured prominently in his multi-tome *History of Soviet Russia* (1950–78) and towards the end of his life he penned two specialist books devoted entirely to the subject.¹⁴ Carr's work is daunting, combining massive empirical breadth and detail with precise analytical passages. In the enforced absence of archival material, Carr tended to rely on official Soviet and Comintern sources, which on occasion dented his otherwise scrupulous scholarship. Another criticism of his work is his almost complete reliance on 'history from above'. There is precious little mention of the activity of rank-and-file communists struggling to implement the Moscow 'line'. But in our opinion one of the most positive characteristics of Carr's approach was his unwillingness to submit to the 'totalitarian paradigm' of the Soviet system that was dominant in Western academic circles in the 1950s and beyond. As we shall see in chapters 3 and 4, he challenges the notion that by the mid-1930s Stalin and the Soviet state had imposed a totally monolithic control over the international communist movement. Rather, he adopts a more nuanced understanding which allows for relatively autonomous action on the part of both Comintern leaders in Moscow and communist parties in their national contexts.

Claudin's interpretation is in the Marxist canon. It is forceful and suggestive. His principal argument is that the Bolshevik rulers of the Comintern failed to differentiate sufficiently between the autocratic political culture of Tsarist Russia and the more open parliamentary systems of Western Europe. As a result, the Comintern 'line' too often underestimated the assimilation of the European working class into the national body politic and exaggerated the revolutionary potential of that class. What was required was a strategic and organisational conception more attuned to Western conditions. In this, he is on solid ground. Claudin can be challenged, however, on his categorical insistence that the national sections were *totally* subordinated to the policy of Stalin and the Soviet state. Also, he appears to overestimate the scope for 'social explosions' at specific conjunctures, such as in France during the Popular Front era, while arguably minimising the political constraints on communist parties operating in highly complicated national and international settings. These criticisms notwith-

standing, Claudin's work is sophisticated, thought-provoking and without doubt the best one-volume history of international communism in the English language.¹⁵

Soviet studies of the Comintern can be neatly, if somewhat artificially, divided in two by the year 1985. From the mid-1980s Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* encouraged scholars to break out of the straitjacket of party orthodoxy which had stunted Soviet historiography since Stalin's time. During the so-called Brezhnevite 'era of stagnation' the official party interpretation of the Comintern had been encapsulated in the handbook *Outline History of the Communist International*, a large tome written under severe ideological controls. It is not a complete whitewash, but glaring omissions, particularly from the Stalinist period, seriously undermine its usefulness.¹⁶ The academic pluralism of the Gorbachev era, combined with the opening of hitherto secret archives, fostered new approaches to the history of the Comintern and we have drawn freely on the work of Russian experts, such as Fridrikh Firsov and Aleksandr Vatlin.

At this point two considerations are in order. The first is the problem of communist terminology. Epithets such as 'left', 'right' and 'centre' connoting real positions on the broad spectrum of leftist politics were appropriated and misused by the various factions in the Soviet power struggles of the 1920s. They were often coupled with terms like 'deviationist', 'sectarian' or 'opportunist' to discredit political opponents who were accused of wavering from the 'party line'. The Stalinists were particularly adept at this name-calling, taking it to absurd lengths during the show trials of the mid-1930s. In the process, the labels 'left' and 'right' tended to lose their meaning. For instance, the designation 'right-wing opportunist' appeared in 1928–9, but in reality there were no anti-party 'rightist' factions in the Comintern at that time. They were artificially constructed by the Stalinists in their campaign against Bukharin and his supporters. Moreover, it was not unheard of for a communist to be vilified as a 'rightist' one year and a 'leftist' the next, as in the case of Trotsky. The second consideration is the need strictly to historicise key moments in the Comintern's evolution. This approach should avoid the pitfalls of a crude teleological rendition of Comintern history, which posits an inevitable straight line progression from 'Leninist authoritarianism' to 'Stalinist totalitarianism'. Links there most certainly were, but we do not believe the Stalinist degeneration of the Comintern was somehow preordained. Only by a close

contextual examination of events in all their historical complexity can the student adequately account for this outcome.

But perhaps the greatest difficulty confronting any historian of the Communist International is the daunting one of selectivity. The Comintern was a world organisation operating in all six continents for almost a quarter of a century. A definitive account of the international communist movement would need not only to examine the structures and multifarious activities of the central Comintern bodies and communist parties, but also be sensitive to such pivotal factors as Soviet domestic and foreign policy, the fluctuating state of the inter-war capitalist economy, the diplomatic manoeuvrings of the Great Powers, and the various socio-political national contexts in which communist parties worked. Where appropriate, we have attempted to pay due regard to these phenomena. We have consciously assumed a Eurocentric approach, which we feel is justified in that the Comintern devoted most of its attention to the European continent as the base of the future socialist revolution. In the years 1917–23 Germany was seen as the key not only to the European revolution, but to the fate of Soviet Russia. However, Asia, and in particular China, was a major preoccupation of the Bolshevik guardians of the Comintern. Therefore, Chapter 5 entitled ‘Comintern in East Asia, 1919–39’, written by Michael Weiner, explores the intricacies of the national and colonial questions.

We acknowledge that many important areas are covered only in outline or neglected altogether: communist attitudes towards the peasantry in Eastern Europe and Latin America, and towards militarism, anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism; cultural policy; the role of women in the Comintern; the ‘Negro question’; and the ‘front organisations’, such as the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU or Profintern) and the Communist Youth International (KIM). It is to be hoped that this slim volume will at least lay the foundations for more detailed research on these significant issues. In the end, the reader must decide whether, given the space constraints, we have been judicious in our selection and interpretation of themes and material.