

An apologia for Stalinism

Book Review: The Reds—The Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality, by Stuart Macintyre, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1998

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In the first volume of a projected two-volume account of the history of the Communist Party of Australia, Stuart Macintyre purports to chronicle the CPA's evolution from its birth in 1920 until World War II, tracing its transformation from a fledgling organisation of dedicated and spirited socialists and revolutionaries into an appendage of the Kremlin.

When it appeared last year, his volume was praised in the media, among middle class radicals and in academic circles. Bernard Smith, writing in the *Australian* newspaper's *Review of Books*, lauded the volume as "admirable", "a heroic achievement" and a "compelling narrative" that was bound to become "the definitive history of the CPA". The Melbourne *Age* awarded Macintyre a literary prize.

Yet, even the origins of Macintyre's work reveal that it has a political agenda. The former leadership of the CPA originally commissioned his work. The invitation came from the Search Foundation, the successor to the CPA, which dissolved itself a decade ago, and the custodian of its records. Macintyre, a member of the CPA for 20 years or so, was given special access to its archives. In writing the book, he collaborated with various ex-CPA leaders such as John Senty—a Stalinist hack since the 1930s—Laurie, Eric and Brian Aarons, Bernie Taft, David McKnight and Jack Munday.

While it has specific Australian peculiarities, *The Reds* is part of a veritable publishing industry that has developed internationally in recent years, specialising in the musings, rationalisations and reminiscences of ex-Stalinists, whether they be from the former Soviet Union, the wreckage of the Stalinist bureaucracies in Eastern Europe or the official Communist Parties in the West. The purpose of this industry is to prosecute the claim that Marxism has failed and therefore there is no alternative but to embrace the capitalist market, even as it produces unprecedented social inequality: permanent mass unemployment, poverty and economic insecurity alongside staggering levels of individual wealth.

Macintyre is a graduate of that milieu. He represents a definite social and political type. Unlike the founders of the CPA, who, in 1920, were inspired by the internationalist and egalitarian ideals of the 1917 Revolution, he was attracted to and joined the CPA in the late 1960s when it was a political corpse as far as socialism is concerned. This was a decade after 1956, the year in which Krushchev's secret speech partially acknowledged Stalin's crimes. Later in the same year, the Kremlin bureaucracy suppressed the Hungarian workers' revolution, demonstrating that Stalinism lived on despite Stalin's death.

After the CPA split with the Moscow-line Socialist Party of Australia in the wake of the 1968 Kremlin invasion of Czechoslovakia, Macintyre and others took the nationalist politics of the CPA and Stalinism to its logical conclusion. In the 1970s and 1980s they distanced the CPA from the Soviet bureaucracy in order to seek domestic respectability, then

embraced Gorbachev's program of restoring capitalism. Finally, they shut down the CPA on their way to joining the Labor Party and pursuing more promising careers in the universities, the trade union bureaucracy and the media. Under the right-wing Labor governments of Hawke and Keating from 1983 to 1996, Macintyre became a favourite son of the Labor leadership, extolling the ALP's own history. He is now the Ernest Scott Professor of History at the University of Melbourne.

Bernard Smith states that "the book does not seek to reduce communism to Stalinism, Leninism to Stalinism and Marxism to both, as so much being written in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union attempts to do". Yet this is precisely what Macintyre does. It is central to his entire project.

On his first page he equates communism with the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union and its liquidation at the hands of Gorbachev. "Communism is no more," he proclaims. Less than two pages later he asserts that any re-evaluation of communism following its "extinction as a historical phenomenon" is unlikely to "so readily separate Stalinism from communism, as so many communists sought to do".

In essence, Macintyre ascribes the tortured history of the CPA not to Stalinism but to the communist project itself. He depicts communism as an all-pervasive system of thought control and physical dictatorship. Thus he writes: "At the heart of communism lay a will for power. Lenin's extreme flexibility of tactics went always with a fundamental intolerance of opposition. Communism was omnivorous, subordinating every aspect of society to the control of the party. Questions of morality were no more immune than religion, philosophy, art or literature to the insistent demand that they serve class interests as determined by the party." [p.41]

This is false to the core. It was Stalinism, not Marxism that sought to dictate in these fields. While the Bolsheviks wrote vigorously on questions of religion, morality, philosophy, art and literature, any conception of seeking to suppress debate on such profound and complex issues was anathema to them. It goes without saying that Macintyre gives no account of the immense impetus that the 1917 Revolution gave to art, nor the flowering of culture and artistic schools in the early days of the Soviet Union, nor the passionate debates taken up by Leon Trotsky, Aleksandr Voronsky and other Left Oppositionists against the Stalinist doctrines of proletarian culture and socialist realism.

At one point, Macintyre even contradicts his own depiction of Lenin as a man consumed with power. He concedes that Lenin, who died in January 1924, "became alarmed at the concentration and abuse of power by leading party members, especially Joseph Stalin, the secretary-general". Before Lenin became largely incapacitated by his second stroke in March 1923 he, in fact, called for a concentrated struggle against the growth of bureaucratism in the party and proposed a bloc with Trotsky. In

his testament, Lenin urged Stalin's removal.

Macintyre's equation of communism and Stalinism saturates the volume, reaching its apogee on page 364 where he identifies not only Stalin but also his progeny, Mao Zedong, Kim Il Sung, Nicolae Ceausescu and Pol Pot, as products and exponents of Marxism-Leninism.

This is hardly original. Like so many others, Macintyre presents the rise of Stalinism as the inevitable outcome of socialist revolution. He ignores the development of a deeply-rooted socialist and working class opposition to the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union, an opposition led in its most conscious form by the Left Opposition founded by Leon Trotsky. The author refers only in passing to the Moscow show trials, the execution of Old Bolshevik leaders and mass purges of the 1930s that Stalin undertook in order to secure the survival of his rule. The assassination of Trotsky and other leaders of the Left Opposition within the Soviet Union and worldwide is passed over in silence.

Despite the access Macintyre had to the CPA's archives, he barely mentions the party's enthusiasm for the Moscow Trials and its slanderous identification of the Left Opposition with Nazism. The record is not difficult to document. Ample citations are given in *Betrayal: a history of the Communist Party of Australia*, published by the Socialist Labour League (the forerunner to the Socialist Equality Party) in 1981. To give one example, on September 5, 1936, *Workers Weekly*, the CPA's newspaper, reported Richard Dixon, a central party leader, instructing a meeting of party officials to combat those who questioned the reports coming from Moscow:

"An infamous agreement to destroy the leaders of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] was hatched in the brains of Trotsky and Zinoviev who were working in league with the Gestapo... Some of our supporters began to question the severity of the decisions of the Soviet Courts. The working class must not be deceived by the sentiments of our enemies for the self-confessed Trotskyite assassins. Trotskyism is identified as fascism, and as we would deal with fascists, so let us deal with Trotskyists." [1]

Having failed to account for this record, how can Macintyre's book be treated as a genuine work of history? Stalin's extermination of his socialist opponents was a political genocide, unparalleled in history. By framing-up and executing hundreds of thousands of socialist-minded workers and intellectuals, Stalin's regime sought to extinguish the Marxist heritage of the October 1917 Revolution in Russia. Not only were the cream of the entire generation that led the revolution slandered in the most pernicious manner as "saboteurs," "counter-revolutionaries" and "Nazi collaborators," they were forced to make ludicrous confessions and then put to death. Quite literally, the flower of Marxism was almost extinguished, within the Soviet Union and worldwide. Politically, this process was replicated throughout the Communist International with terrible historical consequences. Genuine socialists were removed from or hounded out of party leaderships, reducing the International to a bureaucratic prop of the Kremlin apparatus. The only coherent, Marxist opposition came from the Left Opposition and then the Fourth International, founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938.

When Macintyre briefly refers to the Moscow Trials, he runs into particular difficulties. In one instance, he claims that "there is unmistakable evidence of a genuine popular support for Stalin's leadership". Just four sentences later he writes, "Stalin now waged war on the dreamers with show trials of Old Bolsheviks and mass purges that reached far down into the party". Why a figure enjoying genuine popular support would need to launch mass purges deep into the Communist Party is not explained.

Instead, Macintyre attempts to write off the Opposition as "dreamers". Although he chooses not to elaborate, his choice of words is revealing. Why were the oppositionists dreamers? What was unrealistic about their politics? To fight for genuine socialism? For the abolition of bureaucratic

privilege and inequality? For freedom from political oppression? For internationalism? These demands had been axiomatic to the Marxist movement since its birth. Were Stalin's victims justified in fighting for this program or not? By implication, Macintyre's answer is no, but he prefers not to discuss the matter. In that, for all his gentlemanly style, he reproduces the politics of the Stalinist bureaucrats: unable to answer the Opposition politically, they endeavoured to silence it—in their case, through terror, intimidation and murder.

The most striking feature of Macintyre's volume is his summary dismissal of the Trotskyist movement's analysis of the degeneration of the Soviet Union. In his very first footnote, Macintyre brands *Betrayal: a history of the Communist Party of Australia*—the Trotskyist assessment of the CPA's history—as self-serving. He lumps it together with the assorted histories of the CPA produced by the Moscow- and Beijing-backed splittoffs from the party—the forces that embraced every crime committed by the Stalinist bureaucracies. Macintyre dismissively declares that: "Trotskyist histories of Australian communism explained its failure in departure from their exemplar's insights."

By any standard of historical objectivity, a serious piece of research would have to consider the views of Trotsky and the Left Opposition. After all, it was Trotsky who six decades ago, at the height of Stalin's power, drew out the inevitability of the USSR's collapse and the restoration of capitalism, in the event that the revolution was not extended at least to the major capitalist centres of Europe.

Trotsky's prognosis was rooted in the understanding that guided the October 1917 Russian Revolution. In leading the Bolshevik revolution, Lenin and Trotsky always explained that socialism could not possibly be built in poor and backward Russia itself. They insisted that the revolution's fate depended entirely on the development of the worldwide struggle against capitalism. Whereas the weak and belated character of Russian capitalism had made it possible and necessary for the Russian workers to, in a certain sense, leap ahead of their European and American fellow workers in seizing power, the 1917 Revolution was only the opening shot in the world revolution.

Trotsky demonstrated that Stalin's sudden discovery, within months of Lenin's death in 1924, that "socialism can be built in one country"—even one saddled with such inherited backwardness as the Soviet Union—was a fundamental repudiation of Marxism. As a higher stage in the development of humanity's productive forces, genuine socialism could only arise on a global scale. This is the most essential "insight" provided by Trotsky that Macintyre chooses to ignore. In fact, incredible though it may seem, Macintyre makes not one mention in his 500-page volume of Stalin's "theory," which was the political linchpin of the emerging bureaucratic caste that found in Stalin its mouthpiece and became the *leitmotif* of every Communist Party.

In *The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and Where is it Going?* [2] Trotsky demonstrated the inherent inviability of the Soviet state as an isolated entity. In fact, the more industrialised and complex its economy became, Trotsky explained, the more exposed it would be to the pressures of global capitalism through trade and competition. In the final analysis, the emergence of the privileged Kremlin bureaucracy reflected this pressure. Either the Soviet working class, as part of the international working class, would overthrow the bureaucracy, or the bureaucracy would devour the workers' state. Trotsky's prophetic warning was confirmed in the rise of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, the liquidation of the USSR in 1991 and the looting of the Soviet economy by various capitalist factions emerging out of the bureaucracy.

A parallel process took place in every Communist Party. The very logic of Stalin's doctrine of "socialism in one country" elevated the defence of the USSR above the task of the conquest of power by the working class internationally, becoming a justification for Stalin's various attempts to seek partnerships with the capitalist powers, whether fascist or democrat.

This ultimately transformed the Communist International into an adjunct of the Kremlin bureaucracy. Its role became that of defending the Stalinist regime and its relations with the major powers, including seeking alliances with sections of the national capitalist class. "Socialism in one country" became "peaceful coexistence" with world capitalism. Every subsequent twist and turn in the degeneration of the CPA, like its counterparts around the globe, was rooted in that transformation.

Like other early Communist Parties, the CPA, founded in 1920, won to its ranks selfless and principled workers and intellectuals. They were often young and inexperienced, but inspired by the victory of the Russian workers in the October 1917 revolution and by the Bolshevik vision of a global struggle to overturn the injustices and inequality of the private profit system and open the door to a more humane, socialist future.

Among the CPA's founders were several who had suffered months or years in jail for their anti-war activities during World War I. They included Tom Glynn, an Irish immigrant active in the Industrial Workers of the World, who had been imprisoned for four years for seditious conspiracy; Bill Earsman, an executive member of the Victorian Socialist Party; and Peter Siminoff, a Russian who had also been active in the IWW. Also at the founding meeting was Adela Pankhurst Walsh, who had been jailed for leading a demonstration against the price of food in Melbourne. The daughter of the famous English suffragette, Emmeline Pankhurst, she had married Tom Walsh, the secretary of the seamen's union, another founding CPA member. With them were Guido Baracchi, founder of the Victorian Labor College; Christian Jollie Smith, one of the first female solicitors; and Jock Garden, secretary of the NSW Labor Council, who headed a small contingent of trade union officials.

Whatever their personal weaknesses and problems—and Macintyre dwells on them at length—these individuals sought to construct a revolutionary Marxist party, in struggle against the opportunist and pro-capitalist leadership of the Labor Party. However, by the early 1930s the CPA had become thoroughly imbued with the Stalinist world outlook.

Macintyre writes: "Stalin's dictatorship was enforced through purges, show trials, executions and state terror. But in Australia communist discipline was exercised in circumstances where its distinctive sanctions were absent." How then to explain the fact that the CPA "succumbed to Stalinism"? This is a question that Macintyre poses but cannot answer. That is because he agrees with the underlying nationalist politics of Stalinism—the politics that came to dominate the Comintern and the CPA.

In the first place, the Stalinisation of the CPA arose from its acceptance of the perspective of "socialism in one country". Following Trotsky's removal from the leadership of the Communist International and his internal exile in 1926, the Left Opposition's critique of that program, as well as its struggle for inner-party democracy and social equality, were kept from the CPA membership. The Soviet leadership also continued to enjoy immense political authority in their eyes, because of its identification with the 1917 revolution.

Secondly, a subservient leadership was installed in the CPA in 1929-30, in the midst of the so-called Third Period proclaimed by Stalin, during which the Kremlin denounced social democrats as "social fascists". In Australia, this meant characterising Labor Party members as the main enemy of the working class. Macintyre, again echoing the Kremlin line, presents this as the "Bolshevisation" of the CPA. In fact, the Third Period was a panicked reaction by the Stalinists to the fruits of their underlying right-wing policies, notably expressed in severe international defeats for the working masses, in Europe and China, and the resistance of wealthy peasants (kulaks) in Russia.

The new line served only to split and confuse the working class, particularly in Germany, directly leading to Hitler's victory in 1933. The new CPA leaders, figures such as Richard Dixon, J. B. Miles and Lance Sharkey, faithfully enforced this disastrous line until Stalin, without a word of explanation, dumped it in the wake of Hitler's triumph. By 1935,

the Moscow leadership had unveiled the Popular Front policy of seeking common cause with the so-called democratic powers abroad, and "patriotic" and "progressive" parties at home. As Macintyre acknowledges, many of those who were to form the leadership of the CPA after the war were first attracted to the party in this period.

The new layer of CPA officials reflected two connected processes. First, as Trotsky drew out in *The Revolution Betrayed* and "Socialism in a Separate Country?" (Appendix II of *The History of the Russian Revolution*) [3] the blows struck to the prospects of world socialism in Europe and China in the 1920s, alongside the apparent practical successes of the Soviet state, pushed back far-sighted thinking. Despite Hitler's unchallenged conquest, the USSR still occupied one-sixth of the world's territory and was perceived as a bulwark against fascism. These weighty facts, to use Trotsky's words, "formed the social opinion of the younger generation, who have not yet learned to think historically—that is, to compare and foresee." This was so in the USSR and was reflected within the Comintern, giving rise to a slavish adherence to the interests of Moscow.

Second, the new orientation to "democratic" and "national patriotic" forces domestically met up with definite nationalist tendencies in the Australian labour movement. Like their counterparts around the world, the CPA leaders wrapped themselves in the national flag and portrayed themselves as the true champions of the "national traditions" of Australian society. The CPA became the party of "true Australianism" to quote the words of James Rawlings, one of the CPA's leading lights in this period.

After the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union during World War II, this transformation culminated in the CPA's integration into the Labor government's war effort. In line with Moscow, the CPA dubbed the war "the Great Patriotic War" and became the most ardent party of war. Buoyed by official respectability and government support for the suppression of industrial action by CPA trade union officials, the CPA recruited a new nationalist layer and boosted its membership above 20,000 for the first time. Macintyre ends his first volume on that note.

In his conclusion, Macintyre explicitly states his satisfaction with this nationalist orientation. He argues that the CPA and its members made a contribution to political life in Australia despite what he asserts was a politically impossible vision of world revolution—a vision that he perversely associates with the Kremlin bureaucracy. He writes that Australian communism, "Took its instructions from revolutionaries working in utterly foreign circumstances and idioms. Yet it also gathered in local experience."

On the final page of his volume, Macintyre eulogises "the Australian communist," who, by 1939, "was not in fact a revolutionary". He concludes: "The growth of the party, its strong presence in the trade unions and extensive participation in a whole range of public activities made it a part of civil society. It continued to contest exploitation and injustice, to agitate for change and improvement, to counterpose Soviet achievement against capitalist barbarism, but it did so from within, seeking to extend its own disciplined unity to the rest of the working class and thereby bring order and purpose to the whole of national life."

With the words "from within," Macintyre emphasises that the CPA had abandoned any conception of a socialist overturn of the capitalist order and, in the name of seeking "change and improvement," reconciled itself to the profit system.

The Reds is not so much a history but an apology for the CPA's Stalinist and nationalist evolution, written by one of its progeny—one who warmly approves of its rejection of world socialism in favour of seeking to "bring order and purpose to the whole of national life". Hence, in the final analysis, the praise from the literary and political establishment.

Notes

1. *Betrayal: a history of the Communist Party of Australia*, Allen Books

Sydney 1981, pp. 65-66

2. Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed—What is the Soviet Union and Where Is It Going?*, Labor Publications Detroit 1991

3. Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Pluto Press London 1977, pp. 1219 ff



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