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The Devil is Not in the Details: He is Stalin!

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In "Rethinking the historiography of United States Communism," Bryan Palmer explores and explicates the older and the newer scholarship about Communism in US history. Although he focuses on only a part of the history of Communism in the US, the years from the emergence of a separate and independent Communist movement in 1919 to the end of the depression decade, the scale and scope of his historiographical coverage are remarkable. He covers nearly every publication and scholar on the subject. Palmer also establishes why the two decades between 1919 and 1939 were the most decisive in the history of the Communist Party, USA, and its putative allies. Palmer insists, much like the majority of younger, revisionist scholars whose work first began to appear in the 1980s, that Communism had its origins in US soil, yet he diverges from their interpretations by asserting that the CPUSA evolved into a political organization that took its orders from overseas. Palmer appreciates the two volumes that Theodore Draper wrote covering the history of Communism in the US during those crucial two decades as well as the contributions of such Draper disciples as Harvey Klehr and John Haynes. He credits them with understanding that Communism was primarily about politics, ideology, and proletarian internationalism.

Palmer is far less kind to the revisionists, to those who value culture over politics, the local and quotidian over the international and ideological, the personal above the institutional. He concedes that those who have written about individual Communists, focused on more local or regional histories, recorded the oral histories of Communists and former Communists, and studied the impact of Communism on culture have added appreciably to our knowledge of radicalism in the United States. Such scholarship, Palmer is quick to point out, has properly credited Communists with risking much to promote racial justice and the rights of labor, indeed as acting well in advance of others and more aggressively to advance such causes. But he minces no words in rebuking those scholars for refusing to acknowledge that Communism was primarily a political movement to promote proletarian revolution in the United States and around the world, and for neglecting how the Soviet Union, after Stalin gained power, required all other Communist parties to follow the line set in Moscow.

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Palmer is particularly hard on such culturalists as Michael Denning who credits much of popular culture in the 1930s to a Communist "popular front" that "labored America," and Paul Buhle who, in his history of Marxism in the United States, subordinates the political to the cultural. As Palmer makes clear, and as Draper also did many years ago in his two books, the men and women, mostly men, who led the Communist Party in the United States were political animals; their taste in culture more like that of Stalin and others who lauded "socialist realism," than the innovative artists and authors who circulated on the fringes of the party in the depths of the depression and the heyday of the "Popular Front," those creative people Denning credits with "laboring culture." Palmer specifically reminds Denning, Buhle, *et al.*, that "the popular front … never would have been implemented had it not suited to a tee the needs of the political program of 'socialism in one country."

What the culturalist also forget, and what Palmer might have pointed out more clearly, is that the "Popular Front" was of short duration. As late as the summer of 1935, the CPUSA and most of its leading figures continued to condemn Roosevelt as a "social fascist" and to denigrate the Wagner Act as the first savage thrust of fascism. A year later, the "popular front" came into being, the social fascist Roosevelt becoming the people's leader and his New Deal transforming itself from a fascist salient into a reform program that bore the seeds of Communism. Less than three years later, however, the "Popular Front" vanished. With the signing of the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact in 1939, US communists again declared Roosevelt the enemy along with numerous other former allies who insisted on resisting Hitler's Germany. Not only did the CPUSA declare New Deal Democrats and CIO unionists who opposed Hitler to be enemies of the people, Communism, and the Soviet Union; many of those on the cultural left, whether as party members or fellow travellers, deserted the "Popular Front" in the wake of the Stalin–Hitler pact.

Even at its height, moreover, the "Popular Front" was never totally a CPUSA creation. Which is why many of the revisionist historians locate the origins of the "Popular Front" earlier in the 1930s and insist that it did not originate by command of the Comintern, although they still credit Communists with its creation. Many of the people and groups that Denning credits with "laboring American culture" were unregenerate anti-Communists in the years of the "Popular Front," if by Communism, one meant the CPUSA (many, in fact, were opposed to Communism in any form or shape). Old-guard socialists, new-style Trotskyists, remnant Wobblies, and political free-lancers all participated to some degree in constructing popular culture during the 1930s, yet they all rejected the CPUSA. If one includes such as they in the "Popular Front" hypothesized by Denning and the other scholars who seek to validate US Communism's indigenous credentials, then the "front" not only had a short shelf life, it also allied the worst of enemies in an unholy cultural coalition.

The difference between the Communists who participated in Denning's broadly defined "Popular Front" and the others who rejected the CPUSA

flowed from the willingness of CPUSA leaders and members to take "their orders from Moscow." On that score, Palmer is absolutely right. I am less sure, however, about his conviction that Stalin's rise to power explains the peculiar relationship between the Soviet Union and Communist parties around the world. Was Stalin really the source of all the ills and evils associated with communism in the US after 1928? Was pre-Stalin era Communism as tolerant and open as Palmer suggests? Was it really Stalinism that subverted a radical movement with substantially indigenous domestic roots in the US and a commitment to shared and voluntary internationalism into a willing and loyal agent of the Soviet Union and decrees promulgated by the Comintern? Or as Palmer puts it in his own words: "… the poison was a transformation of the Soviet revolutionary process over the course of the 1920s, a Stalinization that reversed the very meaning of revolution not only in Russia but around the world." The myth of Stalin as the devil incarnate has deep roots. Max Eastman was one of the first to promote such an interpretation of the transition from Lenin to Stalin. Upon his return from a trip to the Soviet Union in the early 1920s, Eastman published a book in which he revealed to the "western world" Lenin's "last will and testament," a warning that Stalin not be permitted to rise to power in the Soviet Union. In Eastman's words, Lenin warned that Stalin had already "concentrated too much power in his hands … that he be removed from his dominating position as secretary of the party … and that his character [was] … 'too brutal'."[1] Nearly every former Communist who broke from the Party after the rise of Stalin told a similar tale.

For Palmer, Stalin explains all. And he faults Draper and the scholars who hew to the latter's interpretation of the history of communism in the US for neglecting the impact of Stalin on communism as an international movement and hence locating in communism itself the seeds of future authoritarianism and tragedy. Draper's failure to understand the impact of Stalin, Palmer writes, caused him to see "inevitability where historical contingency should have appeared. The result was a distortingly dismissive, almost biologically determinative, understanding of revolutionary internationalism as pure and simple communist dictation." Before Stalin, Palmer suggests, the Soviet Union, the Comintern, and the Profintern tolerated differences among national Communist parties. Each might choose its own road to power so long as the national party and its members promoted internationalism in the service of proletarian liberation everywhere. Its status as the only Communist Party in power did not confer on the Soviet party the right to issue ukases governing parties worldwide. Palmer wants to believe, as did the subject of the two-volume biography that he is writing, James Cannon, and other Trotskyists, that Stalin perverted the party, the Comintern, and the Soviet Union. Palmer insists that it is past time to revise Draper's history of communism in the U.S., pre-Stalin, and to write a new and different history that treats American communists more generously and compassionately. Like Draper, however, and unlike the

[1] *Since Lenin Died* (London, 1925), pp. 28, 31, esp. p. 29, for Lenin's precise words.

"culturalists" and "revisionists," Palmer insists that such a history must take political ideas and political parties seriously, and that it must focus on the big picture.

For those who share Palmer's interpretation of the history of communism in North America, it suffices to hold Stalin responsible for all that went wrong with communism in the 20th century. Others, however, may have a less sanguine understanding of the history of communism before Stalin's rise to power. From the moment that the Bolsheviks secured their power in the Soviet Union and created the Comintern, numerous radicals in North America and elsewhere balked at the demands that the Comintern laid down for membership in the Third International. The policies implemented by Lenin and his associates caused socialists, Wobblies, and anarchists to reject membership in the Comintern. The sad experience of the anarchist Emma Goldman in the pre-Stalinist Soviet Union offers further evidence early on of the intolerance, inflexibility, and repressiveness of Communism, Soviet style. And her experience was shared by many other voluntary and coerced emigres to the Soviet Union. Indeed, the pre-Stalin Russian Communists did as much to rupture what remained of working-class internationalism as had the socialists of the Second International in their response to the calamity of World War I. If we can put aside Palmer's casting Stalin as the devil incarnate and his positive portrait of the pre-Stalin Communist movement, we can learn much from his thorough and searching analysis of the historiography of Communism in the United States, c. 1919–1940.