In the mid-1960s, C.B. Macpherson, a professor of political economy at the University of Toronto who had just become famous for rethinking the history of seventeenth-century liberalism, broadcast a series of six lectures on democracy for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, published in Britain in 1966 under the title *The Real World of Democracy*. The book jacket summarized his general approach: “Professor Macpherson here examines what he considers to be three legitimate forms of democracy: the liberal democracy of the West, the kind of democracy practised in the Soviet block countries, and the mass democracy of the newly independent states of Africa and Asia.”

In the second lecture, “Non-Liberal Democracy: The Communist Variant,” Macpherson argued that democracy had, in its original meaning, been “a class affair.” Marx’s “humanistic vision” implied that capitalism would need to be abolished and that the “Dictatorship of the Proletariat would replace dictatorship of the capitalists.” Lenin’s contribution was to argue that the proletarian revolution would be the work of “what he called a vanguard, a fully class-conscious minority.”
Lenin seized the opportunity in 1917. “So,” Macpherson noted, “the first communist revolution was made by a vanguard in the name of a whole class. And the Soviet state was from the beginning run by the vanguard, that is, the tightly-knit centrally-controlled Communist Party.”

Macpherson then went on to consider the democratic credentials of the “vanguard state,” concluding that, although it could not be called a democratic system of government, it might still be seen as democratic in “the broader sense” of aiming to eliminate class rule and establish equality. But though Macpherson uses the terms “the Soviet state” and “the Soviet system,” he makes not even a passing reference to the original usage of “soviet” — a workers’ (and peasants’ and soldiers’) council. Long before the collapse of the USSR, the word soviet had lost all such associations even for those such as Macpherson who accepted the broadly democratic legitimacy of the USSR. Now always written with an uppercase S, it was simply part of the noun “Soviet Union” or a related adjective. Yet the soviets constitute the only clear example during the twentieth century of a claim to have established — as an alternative to Macpherson’s liberal democracy — a distinctively different functioning form of democratic government. As the New Statesman put it in March 1920, the soviet system “is the only practical democratic alternative to Parliamentary government which has yet appeared.” By the “myth” of soviet democracy I mean the naïve — or, more charitably, over-optimistic — beliefs about its reality and future prospects that were prominent in the thinking of early supporters of the Russian Revolution and of a wider spectrum of sympathizers on the Left.

Enthusiasm for the soviet system played an important role in generating support for the Bolsheviks in Britain — and, of course, elsewhere. Lenin and company themselves clearly believed that at least the appearance of a functioning system of soviets operated and controlled from the grassroots was vital. The Bolshevik seizure of power had, after all, taken place under the slogan of “All Power to the Soviets,” and in 1922 it was a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics that
was set up. A Communist version of soviet democracy — which had entirely lost credibility except among the most faithful supporters of the USSR by the time Macpherson wrote — was propagated with some success in the interwar period. Yet we rarely now pause to consider the significance of all this.

Consequently, there is now a danger that all but specialist historians may lose any sense that there ever was a perception of a “soviet system” that was different — in the minds of its supporters, at least — from the single-party, top-down autocracy that the words came to signify. And without this sense it is very difficult to understand the enthusiastic support that the Bolshevik revolution generated across much of the Left. This is particularly so in a country like Britain, where opposition to dictatorial rule, suspicion of “leadership” within the Labour movement and beyond, and commitment to the most apparently “real” forms of democracy had become deeply embedded in the culture of the Left — if not without ambiguities, inconsistencies, and co-existence with attitudes sometimes difficult to reconcile with such democratic and egalitarian values.⁴

In the twenty-first century it is too easy to assume that vanguardism, as defined by Macpherson, had characterized support for the Bolsheviks from the first hour. By contrast, this book re-emphasizes the part played by the myth of soviet democracy in the early appeal of the Russian Revolution. This is not to claim that soviet democracy was the sole feature of that revolution that attracted left-wing support. Nor is it to deny that there were authoritarian aspects to pre-Leninist socialist thought in Britain. The Fabians had always been suspected, by those to their left, of being lukewarm democrats at best and of subscribing to a “weak” version of democracy.⁵ Among the Fabians, George Bernard Shaw became well known as a vehement critic, indeed adversary, of democracy.⁶ A more surprising example is offered in Kevin Morgan’s detailed exploration of the influence of the US Army Corps of Engineers and its instrumental role in the building of the Panama Canal during the decade preceding the Great War on the thinking of that founder of guild socialism, S.G. Hobson.⁷ Although military hierarchy
may seem an unlikely model for an advocate of workers’ democracy, we should not be surprised to find instances of authoritarian thinking in the statements of even the most ardent supporters of soviet democracy.

Indeed, such ambivalence helps us to understand the later shifts in the direction of support for the notion of the vanguard party and for the version of the dictatorship of the proletariat that legitimized it. The possibility that conflicting ideas — ultra-democratic and dictatorial — could co-exist in the same head is perhaps suggested by the two quotations towards the end of this introduction. But, whatever our own sympathies, we cannot understand the attraction of communism in its earliest days if we imagine that those who experienced it had the remotest notion of the imminent emergence of, in the words of Robert Service, “a social nightmare worse than anything endured under capitalism.” When Arthur Ransome, in the introduction to his *Six Weeks in Russia in 1919*, called the revolution “the greatest convulsion in the history of our civilisation,” we can be confident that the future author of *Swallows and Amazons* believed this convulsion to be one in which the positive — current and especially future — greatly outweighed the negative.⁸

In part, then, this is a study of the establishment of a legitimacy in the minds of a significant spectrum of socialist opinion in Britain. Right up to its collapse, the USSR could rely on significant groups of people in all parts of the world who, with whatever reservations about its actual policies and practices, regarded the Soviet Union as a — or as the — legitimate embodiment of socialist theory. For them, the USSR and other communist countries were the only “actually existing” alternative to capitalism and represented, however imperfectly, a new and higher form of civilization. There were many on the Left — and sometimes elsewhere — who accepted, to varying degrees, the legitimacy of Soviet communism without committing themselves to Communist Party membership. The myth of soviet democracy played a key role in establishing this legitimacy in the earliest years of Bolshevik rule.

If we ask why, in spite of everything that happened, such a stance was quite commonplace throughout the period of Soviet communism,
we come back to the wide legitimacy it enjoyed in the minds of so many on the Left, a legitimacy that seemed at times to be almost infinitely flexible: police states, show trials, the gulags, Stalin’s pact with the Nazis, the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia could all be explained away, minimized, forgiven, and even justified. This further underlines the importance of the question of how that legitimacy was established in the first place. Why did so many people whose own proclaimed values were those of equality, freedom, and democracy — and who, in many cases, had very honourable records of promoting these values in social and political struggles at home — come to take the vital step of accepting the socialist legitimacy of the Bolsheviks in the early days of their rule?

After all, there was never a shortage of socialist critics of Bolshevism such as, well to the left of the movement, Rosa Luxemburg. In the West, the socialist mainstream, represented in Britain by the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the Labour Party, officially rejected Bolshevism, notwithstanding degrees of sympathy on the part of many individual members and supporters. So did the generally acknowledged intellectual leader of Second International Marxism, Karl Kautsky. He was not alone, but socialist critics too often tended, like Kautsky or like Henry Hyndman, a leading figure in the Social-Democratic Federation/British Socialist Party from the early 1880s until the “split” of 1916, to be from an older generation — yesterday’s men and women. For F.J. Gould, speaking at the Hyndman Memorial Committee’s commemoration in 1924, his subject might be a “Prophet of Socialism,” but this second such annual event seems to have been the last.9

The degree of legitimacy established by communism can be sensed by the extent to which the collapse of the Soviet and Eastern European “experiment” has since been seen as totally discrediting all versions of socialism. Long before this, it had been widely perceived that, especially when the Cold War was at its height, the spectacle of “actually existing socialism” greatly inhibited the development of democratic socialism “since all socialist initiatives became suspect
and were tarnished by association” with it. Unfortunately, for those favouring such a development, the damage continued after the fall of communism. Tony Judt refers to the “residual belief system” based on nineteenth-century socialist thought and concludes, in Ill Fares the Land: “However perverted the Moscovite variation, its sudden and complete disappearance could not but have a disruptive impact on any party or movement calling itself ‘social democratic.’” How communism came to be accepted as at least a legitimate version of socialism is therefore a question that has contemporary as well as historical importance.

It is the argument of this book that the myth of Soviet democracy — the belief that Russia was embarking on a brave experiment in a form of popular government more genuine and more advanced than even the best forms of “bourgeois” democracy — played a key role in this acceptance. It was part of a complex of perceptions that included the belief that social and economic equality were simultaneously being advanced by means of this higher form of political equality. As we shall see, even some of the most determined anti-Communists of later years were, to begin with, anxious to give the Bolsheviks and their revolution the benefit of the doubt — in some cases for a surprisingly long time. Even those who dismissed any notion of adhering to a Communist Party in Britain often seem to have retained, well into the 1920s and sometimes considerably beyond, at least a “residual belief” in the reality of soviet democracy in Russia. Much of this can be traced in the pages, including the correspondence columns, of the ILP’s weekly, Labour Leader, and, perhaps more surprisingly, in the Fabian-oriented New Statesman.

Initially, in 1920, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was little more than the British Socialist Party (BSP) — founded originally, in the 1880s, as the Social-Democratic Federation (SDF) — writ large. At the founding conference, the only other really significant group comprised some prominent members of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) who had left that party to form the Communist Unity Group (CUG). At this stage, Sylvia Pankhurst’s group of
“Left Communists,” under attack from no less than Lenin himself in “Left-Wing” *Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, stood aside from the “unity” process and set up their own Communist Party (British Section of the Third International). Only Britain and Germany were awarded entire chapters in Lenin’s extended diatribe against the Communist “Left,” and the section on Britain consisted of a critique of a single issue (that of 21 February 1920) of the *Workers’ Dreadnought*, the weekly paper edited by Pankhurst. In the face of tremendous pressure from the Third, or Communist, International (Comintern) for all the groups it considered eligible for membership to unite to form a single Communist Party, the following year saw the shop stewards’ movement and the CP (BST1), in spite of its hostility to “parliamentarism,” brought within the fold.

The CPGB also gained adherents from the “Left Wing” of the ILP and from the guild socialist movement. Apart from the Labour Party itself, of which it was a part, the ILP was the largest of the British socialist organizations. Its “Left Wing” originally consisted of party members who favoured affiliation to the Third International and who sought to move the ILP in this direction. But in all these cases there remained those who rejected the communism of the CPGB. Perceptions of the reality, or otherwise, of soviet democracy in Russia and of the role that this supposedly higher form of democracy ought to play in the coming socialist transformation was crucial in determining the positions that organizations and individuals were to take.

More, perhaps, than any other individual, Sylvia Pankhurst exemplifies the appeal of soviet democracy in its purest form. Pankhurst’s small but very active group originated as the East London Federation of the Women’s Social and Political Union. When the socialist commitments and working-class orientation of Pankhurst’s group led to its expulsion from the union at the beginning of 1914, it reconstituted itself as the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS). During the war years, the ELFS was transformed first into the Workers’ Suffrage Federation and then into the Workers’ Socialist Federation (WSF). Then, in June 1919, the WSF proclaimed itself to be the “Communist
Party,” only to drop the new title for the time being in the interests of promoting wider unity. A year later it became, with the adherence of groups even smaller than the WSF, the ambitiously but not entirely accurately named Communist Party (British Section of the Third International). Overcoming its “Left Communist” misgivings, and with many defections, the CP (BST1) merged with the “orthodox” Communist Party early in 1921. Pankhurst herself was formally expelled by the CPGB executive in September 1921, and subsequently she and her paper, the Workers’ Dreadnought, became the promoters of the tiny Communist Workers’ Party.3

Sylvia Pankhurst figures prominently in Mark Shipway’s Anti-Parliamentary Communism (1988), which traces the story of the — mainly libertarian or anarchist — advocates of “soviet democracy” (most notably the indefatigable Guy Aldred) in Britain up to the end of the Second World War. The aim of the present book is different. It seeks to show the impact of the “myth” on a much wider and more varied range of opinion than is represented by these “true believers.” It concentrates, with a focus on the period from 1917 to 1924, on that part of the ideological spectrum stretching from those on the left of the Labour Party in the ILP, through the early constituents of the British Communist Party, to those organizations — Pankhurst’s group, the syndicalist shop stewards associated with Solidarity, and the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) — that were early candidates for inclusion in a British Communist Party but later formed a chorus of dissenting would-be revolutionaries who stood to the left of the CPGB — what orthodox Communists came to label the “ultra-Left.”

If Pankhurst exemplified the appeal of soviet democracy in its most authentic form, those who did accept the tutelage of the new Communist International and join the CPGB are in some ways the most interesting group on the British Left. It is entirely understandable that many who had invested so much in the hopes generated by the revolution, including the myth of soviet democracy, should find it hard to abandon their allegiance to Communism — though many were to do just this. The key question is how those who remained in
the CPGB negotiated the change from seeing themselves as promoters of grassroots working-class democracy on a heroic scale to advocating centralized rule by a self-defining vanguard. It is true that Britain already boasted a tiny “vanguard party,” of a sort, in the shape of the SLP, although, as we shall see, it is wrong to see the SLP’s form of vanguardism as identical with that developed by the Communists. But, however one looks at it, this was a dramatic and significant shift.

The scale of the change in outlook can be illustrated by juxtaposing two quotations from the writings of J.T. Murphy, which can be taken as examples of attitudes to democracy before and after the Bolshevization of part of the Left — and of Murphy. A Sheffield engineer who graduated from membership in the pre-war Daily Herald League to the wartime shop stewards’ movement, Murphy joined the SLP in the autumn of 1917, served as a leading member of the CPGB until his resignation in 1932, and, for a period, sat on the Comintern executive committee. The first quotation below is from his pamphlet, *The Workers’ Committee: An Outline of Its Principles and Structure* (1917), an important landmark in the wartime shop stewards’ movement:

Real democratic practice demands that every member of an organisation shall participate actively in the conduct of the business of the society. We need, therefore, to reverse the present situation, and instead of leaders and officials being in the forefront of our thoughts the questions of the day which have to be answered should occupy that position. It matters little to us whether leaders be official or unofficial, so long as they sway the mass, little thinking is done by the mass. If one man can sway the crowd in one direction, another man can move them in the opposite direction. We desire the mass of men and women to think for themselves, and until they do this no real progress is made, democracy becomes a farce....

The functions of an elected committee, therefore, should be such that instead of arriving at decisions for the rank and file they would provide the means whereby full information relative to any question of policy should receive the attention and consideration of the rank and file,
the results to be expressed by ballot.” The more responsibility rests upon every member of an organisation the greater is the tendency for thought to be more general, and the more truly will elected officials be able to reflect the thoughts and feelings of the members of the various organisations.14

It is easy to see how the Russian soviets initially appeared to exemplify the grassroots, rank-and-file democracy that Murphy advocated. How startlingly different was to be his view in Preparing for Power: A Critical Study of the History of the British Working-Class Movement, published in 1934: “The idea that a spontaneous movement of the masses will ‘spontaneously throw up’ a leadership and a policy is moonshine. Leaders who come to the front in the hour of crisis have invariably years of preparation behind them however obscure it may be.”

Now Murphy was dismissive of The Miners’ Next Step — a once-famous syndicalist-inspired work of 1912 that had much in common with the views Murphy expressed in The Workers’ Committee. According to the later Murphy, it had “created an anti-official outlook of a character which stultified any real organised effort to replace reactionary leaders with revolutionary leaders.” The conference of Workers’ Committees in November 1916, in which Murphy had in fact played a not insignificant part, had failed to “define its attitude to political parties”:

This is not peculiar to this conference in that the shop stewards’ movement throughout its existence never discussed the question until in its closing days, after the formation of the Communist Party in 1920. In this it was really carrying on the traditions of the syndicalist conferences. At the same time it shows how little the revolutionary socialists understood the role of a revolutionary party. Although the leading shop stewards were also leaders of the S.L.P. and the B.S.P. the parties did not discuss their responsibilities for directing the movement.15

* Unless otherwise noted, emphasis is in the original.
One would hardly guess from this that Murphy had ever had any sympathy with such attitudes — let alone that he had been one of the main advocates of a now-heretical position.

While it can be argued that what Ralph Darlington calls Murphy’s “political trajectory” was to be characterized by such sharp changes of view, moving “from syndicalism to communism to left reformism to popular frontism to anti-Marxism,” the juxtaposition of the statements quoted above illustrates quite neatly the beginning of the shift of emphasis from what we might call “sovietism” to “vanguardism.” Yet even in the latter there was, as we shall see in the penultimate chapter, some sort of role for the idea of soviet democracy.

Four decades ago, there was considerable interest in the British Left of the early twentieth century. Among the work whose interest has endured may be mentioned L.J. Macfarlane’s book on the early years of the British Communist Party, that of James Hinton on the shop stewards’ movement, and that of Bob Holton on British syndicalism. But, more than by any other single work, my own interest was sparked by Walter Kendall’s groundbreaking *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain.*

Although Kendall’s work centred on the formation of the CPGB, initially my own interest was directed to the very different world of the pre-1914 British Left (to which Kendall’s work introduced me), particularly as regards its notions about the relationship between socialism and democracy and its interpretations of the latter. My interest in the pre-war Left was reinforced by Logie Barrow’s work on the Clarion movement. Later, though, my interest moved on to the period of the Russian Revolution. This book is the main outcome, having been preceded, back in 1992, by an effort to trace Sylvia Pankhurst’s route to “Left-Wing Communism.”

Interest in the early years of the British Left declined in the 1980s, but a modest revival began with the opening of the Russian archives, which stimulated and informed work on both national Communist parties and the Comintern, based on evidence previously beyond reach. In the case of the British Communist Party, this has
included Andrew Thorpe’s re-evaluation of its origins, as well as Kevin Morgan’s biography of its long-time leader, Harry Pollitt, and his *Bolshevism and the British Left* trilogy. One sign of the renewed interest in the worldwide Communist movement was the appearance in 2009 of the new journal, *Twentieth-Century Communism*.

But by no means has all of the more recent work on the early twentieth century Left in Britain focused on the CPGB. There has been Sheila Rowbotham’s definitive biography of Edward Carpenter, while David Howell’s contributions have thrown a great deal of much-needed light on the Labour Party and the ILP in the early decades of the last century. And for the period some years beyond those that are the main focus of the present work, there is Gidon Cohen’s thought-provoking and stimulating work on the post-disaffiliation ILP.

With some notable exceptions, such as Karen Hunt’s enquiry into the feminist credentials of the SDF, for the most part the concentration has either been largely biographical or has centred on the strategies, tactics, and organizational trajectory of various parties and movements rather than on the ideas and beliefs that inspired their adherents. There has been no sustained examination of the ideas about “soviet democracy” that motivated both those who eventually formed the CPGB and those who widely expected, or at least hoped, to be part of this new venture on the Left but who in the end declined to be signed up for that enterprise. This is the gap that the present book seeks to make a contribution to filling.

This is not, in the usual sense, a contribution to the history of ideas or to intellectual history as normally understood. Many of the debates that are presented here concern not the carefully composed texts of recognized theorists but editorial comments, polemical articles, and letters found in the main socialist papers of the period. Sometimes a single strand of argument from an otherwise unknown correspondent in fact serves to crystallize a particular argument, attitude, or belief.

The structure of the book is neither entirely chronological nor consistently thematic. The first chapters follow the reaction to the revolutionary events in Russia on the British Left as those events...
unfolded. Most of the later chapters focus on what a range of specific left-wing organizations made of the notion of soviet democracy and how they reacted to the different interpretations of it, with some regard to chronology but inevitably with overlaps in terms of time. Interspersed are two chapters that attempt to make sense, first, of the ideas about soviet democracy itself that were initially current and, second, of the hopelessly ambiguous notion of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” that, in some versions at least, came to be associated with these ideas. Ambiguity, though, had its advantages for would-be British Bolsheviks, as we shall see.