EQUIVOCAL REFORMISTS
The Independent Labour Party, the Guild Socialists, and the Reaction to Kautsky

ILP Critics: Giving the Bolsheviks Some Benefit of the Doubt

The BSP was by far the largest of the would-be Bolshevik organizations in Britain and, in 1920, was to form the core and provide most of the initial membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain. But both the ILP Left Wing and the guild socialist movement contributed key individuals to the new party. From the ranks of the ILP came, for example, J.T. Walton Newbold, Shapurji Saklatvala, Helen Crawfurd, and Emile Burns. The guild socialist contribution included William Mellor, Ellen Wilkinson, Palme Dutt, and Page Arnot. Some, like Wilkinson, had been active in both contexts.

Numerically, the BSP was greatly inferior to the ILP. Moreover, with Labour’s new constituency organizations still in their infancy, the ILP remained the main means by which individuals participated
in the Labour Party as socialists. It would be the ILP that, more than any other single party or grouping, would decide the fate of Bolshevism in Britain during the crucial few years following 1917. And at first, indeed, the prospects for a pro-Bolshevik ILP seemed far more hopeful than hindsight might suggest.

The fervently pro-Bolshevik atmosphere on the British Left in early 1918 is evident even in the first real criticism of the Bolsheviks to appear in *Labour Leader*. The prominent pacifist Dr. Alfred Salter contested their democratic legitimacy, but only after applauding them at length “for their unflinching courage, their incorruptible devotion to first principles, their uncompromising devotion to the ideal (called fanaticism by the worldly-wise), their openness and frankness.” He argued, however, that “with full allowance for the dangers and isolated position in which the Bolshevik movement finds itself, we must definitely dissociate ourselves from its violence, its suppression of opposing criticism and its disregard for democracy.”

“It is fashionable in certain Socialist circles,” Salter went on, “to decry Constituent Assemblies and Parliaments elected by universal suffrage, to sneer at them as ‘bourgeois’ and to extol the method of Soviet government as ‘proletarian.’ But except by universal suffrage how can every single citizen make his voice heard and his influence felt?” True, “a development” of the Soviet machinery “might make it possible that every single citizen might acquire a similar power,” although this would be difficult. Moreover, “with the Soviets as they are today, less than half the nation is represented. Only a very few women are organized in the Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Councils, and probably a bare third of the total population of Russia can at present make its protest against, or give its sanction to, the acts of the Bolshevik Government.”

“Socialism apart from true democracy,” Salter concluded, “is not only meaningless but valueless.” Faced with the Bolshevik stance in the peace negotiations with Germany, which confronted “the might of the Central Empires with nothing but principles, the whole world stood amazed. Ideas and ideals were suddenly seen to be the most powerful of all high explosives.” But the Bolsheviks had now done “much
to frustrate their own appeal.” They were “ruling by bayonets” and had undermined their moral authority by their acts of violence. In the long run, he predicted, this would prove a fatal weakness.¹ Salter’s biographer, Fenner Brockway, writing nearly thirty years later, quoted parts of this article, which he commended as a “balanced view” of the Russian Revolution.²

There did appear the occasional comment hostile to the Bolsheviks, but an equivocal tone, somewhat similar to Salter’s, was usually present, reflecting, in part at least, a wish to separate the “pro-peace” aspect of the Bolsheviks from the more disturbing features of their rule. As we have already seen in the case of the suppression of the Constituent Assembly and the presentation of soviet rule as an “experiment,” there was a desire, even among critics, to give the Bolsheviks the benefit of the doubt wherever possible, as is exemplified by Ramsay MacDonald’s statement in early July 1918 that “the Russian Government has committed acts which no Socialist can condone. But we have to remember that the Revolution is still on.”³

It was not until August 1918 that the Leader carried the first letter from a reader unequivocally condemning the Bolsheviks’ actions. Richard Robinson insisted that “the forcible dissolution of the Constituent Assembly was a crime against Democracy which should be emphatically repudiated by all Socialists.” The letter was followed by a long and ambivalent editorial note that, while critical of the “Bolsheviks’ appeal to force,” argued that “where Bolshevism has slain its hundreds for ideal ends, capitalist imperialism has slain its millions for the basest ends known to mankind.”⁴ Robinson was responding to a piece by R.C. Wallhead that had appeared the previous week. Two years later, Richard Wallhead was to succeed Snowden in chairing the ILP and a few years after that was to become Labour MP for Merthyr. But in the 1918 article he was fulminating against Allied intervention against the Bolsheviks. In the course of this, he had referred to “the first great Socialist Republic” and had claimed that “the Socialist Government of Russia has behind it 85 per cent of the people.” British workers were “demanding the democratic control of industry: the Russian workers
have it,” he declared. Rather surprisingly, his statements and Robinson’s rejoinder led to no further debate in the paper.

Even after the war had ended, outright opposition to the Bolsheviks and criticism of the soviet system — either in principle or in practice — only very slowly became more common in the pages of *Labour Leader*. The tendency to give the Bolsheviks *some* benefit of the doubt is evident in Ramsay MacDonald’s anti-intervention article, “Hands off Russia,” written in the summer of 1919:

In supporting the Russian Revolution we are not necessarily taking sides either for or against Soviets or Bolshevism. We are recognising that during a revolution there must be Jacobinism, but that if that Jacobinism be evil the way to fight it is to help the country of the revolution to settle down and assimilate the revolution. Bolshevism can be tested only by the free operation of political opinion and experience in Russia. If it be said that it is maintaining itself by force and repression, it is the Allies who are creating the conditions which allow it to do that.

He then drew an historical parallel with the French Revolution. If the Russian Revolution survived,

its Soviets may disappear by being modified into some new type of democratic government, but it will start a new liberal movement of thought which will be as fruitful later on in the century as the French Revolution was in the century that is gone. Lenin will occupy in the 20th century a place akin to that held by Rousseau in the 19th century.6

A similar line was taken in an article in September by Joseph King, which ended: “If the Soviet idea spreads either as an adjunct or an alternative to Parliamentary Government, then Lenin and the Russian Revolution may well be viewed by historians of the next century as the greatest and the outstanding event of the world war.”7

A key factor in understanding this equivocal view of Bolshevism and soviet democracy was the opposition to intervention in Russia — something that united the entire Left, including even the NSP. In May
1919, Hyndman declared: “Bitterly opposed as I am to Bolshevism in all its forms, I regret that British armies should have been sent to Russia in order to defeat the Bolsheviks.” As became clear some weeks later, Hyndman’s belief was that by “invading Russia and supporting Admiral Koltchak and General Denikin, we are actually strengthening, not weakening the Bolsheviks.”

The front page of the 17 July issue of Labour Leader — the one that included MacDonald’s prophecies regarding the possibly benign longer-term influence of Lenin — opened with emphatic headlines:

**STOP THE WAR ON RUSSIA. IT IS A WAR AGAINST DEMOCRACY! IT IS A WAR ON SOCIALISM! LONG LIVE THE RUSSIAN SOCIALIST REPUBLIC!**

But behind such displays of solidarity, the division of opinion concerning Bolshevism within the ILP was becoming increasingly clear in the wake of initial attempts to affiliate the party to the Third International.

Early in 1920, the growing division was reflected in Labour Leader’s “ILP Debating Column.” It opened with an article critical of the Bolsheviks written by H.J. Stenning, whose translation of Kautsky’s *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* was about to appear. Among the first to respond to Stenning was Mark Starr, who defended the Bolsheviks against the charge of instituting anything but a temporary dictatorship. Starr went on to make the familiar point about soviet democracy being based on industrial rather than territorial constituencies. In Russia, “workers through their Shop committees control the conditions of their lives,” he claimed. He then turned to the aspect of the soviet model that is in fact indispensable for understanding what attracted so many socialists to the early soviet system. Critics of the soviets, claimed Starr, “seem invariably to miss that delegates and not representatives” were the means of carrying out the wishes of the voters in the soviets. “In our miners’ lodges we already have an approximation to this,” he argued. “When questions are discussed the delegate is mandated to vote upon particular questions instead of being elected to ‘represent’ his fellows...
for a lengthy period. This with the power of recall is certainly a step in the right direction."

As the debate continued, George Benson replied to Starr, under the title “Our Soviet Impossibilists.” There was “no magic in a Revolution to bring a man from the wrong side of a ballot box to the right side of a barricade,” he wrote. The vote was more than part of the governmental system; it was “a symbol of personal liberty”:

Mr. Starr’s most effective blow at our British Sovietists is his unconscious ridicule of the cry for delegation not representation by showing that they wish to run complex affairs of the Nation and indeed the world, as if they were the comparatively simple business of a Miners’ Lodge.

Because a T.U. branch can instruct its delegates how to vote upon a special point nothing will satisfy our revolutionary friends than that the immense mass of national legislation shall be discussed point by point by the whole nation, the function of M.Ps being merely to carry out the mandate of their constituents.

There is a considerable amount of legislation passed nowadays. In a period of social change it would be increasingly more. Is the whole nation to sit day by day in solemn legislative conclave to decide what mandates it shall give, or is legislation to be reduced to a week’s congress once a year? The former would not be good for industry, while the latter would tend to delay the Social Revolution a little.

There were other voices taking part in the debate that week. R.K. Weaver questioned whether there was any essential difference between the soviets disfranchising non-workers and the disfranchisement in Britain of “certain classes such as women under thirty,” further pointing out that, in Russia, the disenfranchised could “always obtain representation by becoming workers.” He also asked whether the Bolsheviks could have survived without being accepted “by the majority of the Russian nation.” C. Manne believed that an “intelligent minority” must always be in control during revolutionary periods and that the length of time they stayed in power depended on “the number of people who they are able to make class-conscious.”
For his part, P. McOmish Dott thought it unfair to “discuss the machinery of the Russian state while it is fighting for its very existence.” In any case, he insisted, the Bolshevik leaders had publicly declared that the present form of the state was transitional, and the elections showed that they represented the majority of the Russian people. Dott concluded that if the Soviet government “adopted the Swiss method whereby no law becomes effective until voted on and approved by the whole people at the half-yearly election, even Kautsky’s criticism would fall to the ground.”

Conflicts in the National Guilds League

If the membership of the ILP was to become vehemently divided over what attitude to take towards soviet democracy and the Bolsheviks, the same was true of the National Guilds League (NGL). The Guildsman, published monthly, had been launched in 1916 by the Glasgow Group of the NGL. Subtitled A Journal of Social and Industrial Freedom starting with its fifth issue, in April 1917, the paper became the league’s “official organ” when it moved operations to London in the spring of 1919 and from the following September was edited by G.D.H. Cole and Margaret Cole. Since the beginning of that year, the former had been advocating that the organization change its name to the “Guild Socialist League.” This proposal produced considerable fervent debate among Cole’s supporters and opponents alike. It divided NGL members broadly along the lines of those who, like the Coles, were at least initially supportive of the Bolsheviks, believing that “soviet democracy” had sufficient reality to be potentially a step in the direction favoured by the NGL, and those who saw them rather as suppressors of democracy in every form — including industrial democracy.

The name of the paper, if not of the NGL itself, was eventually changed. In April 1921, it appeared as The Guild Socialist: A Journal of Workers’ Control. This abrupt change was carried out without warning to readers but with the NGL executive’s approval. It was, the paper explained, the consequence of receiving a letter from the editor of a
journal called The Guildsman, as a result of which it was learnt “that there was another, and a much older, and more respectable, monthly journal bearing the same name and devoted to the interests of certain movements within the Church of England.”

Back in 1919, taking the lead in opposing Bolshevism — and Cole’s proposed name-change for the NGL — were C.E. Bechhofer and Maurice B. Reckitt, the authors of The Meaning of National Guilds, which had been so praised in Justice. Reckitt thought that “socialist” was “a hopelessly stale and exhausted word, which gives rise to endless misunderstanding and can be construed to mean anything from Bolshevism to Bureaucracy.” Bechhofer agreed, believing that the word might “still be a rallying cry for professed Socialists; but it certainly is not for the vast mass of the people to whom our propaganda is directed.”

Before this, in the summer of 1918, Bechhofer had put forward an analysis of Russian developments that combined broad approval for the soviets with total rejection of Bolshevism. In his version of events, the workshop and factory committees had been set up by Russian workers as the chief means “to improve industrial life.” Some success had been achieved: “The general result, as the workers improved their conditions, was that output was increased and discipline maintained.” The soviets had begun well:

Then came the Bolsheviks with their mischievous “politicising” of industry. The Workers were encouraged to elect — not as hitherto, the men best qualified to administer the work, but those who were the best exponents of certain political views. As a result, factories in which the workers were predominantly Bolshevik in their political views elected Bolshevik orators to their Committees, Mensheviks elected Mensheviks, Cadets, Cadets.

Thus commenced the reign of the Demagogue in Russia — the dominion of the “worker’s representative” who represented him not as a worker but as a proletarian.
The result had been the “ruin of Russian industry” by the Bolsheviks, whose industrial policy, insofar as they had one, was “clearly ‘Syndicalist,’” in contrast to that of the Mensheviks, whose industrial constitution was “very near the National Guilds.”

The next month’s issue of The Guildsman apologized for the absence of a pro-Bolshevik reply to Bechhofer, which had been “unavoidably held over.” The same issue also reported on the NGL’s third annual conference, during which Bechhofer and Reckitt — now members of the newly elected executive — were prominent in opposing a motion by Cole supporting the Bolsheviks, whom Cole described as the “only effective opposition to capitalism in Russia.” In response, Bechhofer rehearsed the arguments he had deployed in his article the month before, and Reckitt urged that “Guildsmen ought not to commend a policy based on methods which repudiated democracy and depended on terrorism.” He added that, in any case, a motion such as Cole’s, which was “political in character,” was outside the scope of the guilds movement.

The carrying of a “previous question” ended the conference debate, but the underlying argument in the NGL was only just beginning. In August 1918, M.I. Postgate, soon to marry and become better known as Margaret Cole, replied to Bechhofer’s anti-Bolshevik attack in an article titled “National Guilds and the Bolsheviks.” Drawing on data published in The Board of Trade Journal, she explained that the first fundamental decree of the Bolshevik Council of People’s Commissaries had been “designed to introduce the control of industry by the workpeople.” She stressed the “inclusion of the technical classes and the salariat” — something that was a major preoccupation in the NGL — and the recognition by the Bolsheviks of what she called the “dual principle of Government.” This, she thought, should “rid the minds of Guildsmen of the idea that the Bolsheviks are merely syndicalist proletarians.”

Claiming that she had misquoted him, Bechhofer remained unmoved by these arguments:
Miss Postgate must forgive me if I suggest that her obvious sympathy with the internationalist and pacifist programmes of the Bolsheviks has made her blind to the industrial side of their revolution. What holes would she have pulled in that decree if it had been issued by any other Russian political party! I submit that National Guilds were implicit in the industrial arrangements of the first revolution, but that they are neither sought by, nor realisable under, the Bolsheviks.\(^9\)

What makes Bechhofer’s position significant is that, in contrast to most enthusiasts for soviet democracy at the time, he saw the Bolsheviks not as promoters and defenders — still less originators — of grassroots workplace democracy but as its enemies and destroyers. Writing in *The Guildsman* early the following year, Reckitt was, as one would expect, equally clear about the incompatibility between the guilds movement and Bolshevism: “National Guilds cannot (in my view) be squared with Bolshevism any more than with Collectivism. The Guildsman takes his stand on industrial democracy, as opposed equally to the ‘dictatorship’ of the bureaucrat and to the dogmatic neo-Marxist (often a ‘bourgeois’) who mistakes himself and his clique for ‘the proletariat.’”\(^9\)

In the same issue, Bechhofer insisted, in a letter opposing Cole’s “Guild Socialist League” proposal, that members of the NGL “do not want to establish State Socialism *alias* State Capitalism . . . because it means the Servile State. Nor do they want its opposite, the ‘Industrial Society’ of the S.L.P.”\(^9\) “The term ‘Servile State’ had become quite widespread on the Left and was used in many different contexts to suggest the danger that state control and the nationalization of industry might result not in the emancipation of the workers but in their virtual enslavement. For example, in a piece on the effects of the war published in *The Herald* at the beginning of 1917, Edward Owen Greening, who was prominent in the co-operative movement, concluded that “Great Britain is becoming a Servile State; Germany already is one.”\(^9\)

The phrase went back to Hilaire Belloc’s pre-war book of that title, which had generated considerable discussion in the socialist press at
Belloc, though not himself a “Guildsman,” or indeed any variety of socialist, was an occasional contributor to *The Guildsman*, which regarded him and G.K. Chesterton — together nicknamed “Chesterbelloc” — as “friendly critics.” The very first issue of the journal, that of December 1916, had announced: “The Guildsman comes with a warning, a summons, and a plan — a warning against the Servile State which all unsuspected is fast being established in our midst.” This was followed by a piece by Belloc titled “The Coming of Servile Labour,” which appeared in February 1917. It was in this context that at the special conference at the end of 1920 — which, according to the December issue of *The Guildsman*, had been called to decide whether there was “any future for Guild Socialism” — Page Arnot charged, not without some justification, that the NGL’s “right wing had abandoned the class-struggle and were moving rapidly towards Mr Chesterton and the Distributists.”

Bechhofer’s and Reckitt’s commitment to industrial democracy and their suspicion of “politcising” were paralleled in the syndicalist-influenced shop stewards’ movement. The widely held view of the guild socialists as a group of middle-class theorists remote from the working class and the world of industrial work is understandable but is in need of considerable modification. Even without taking into account the ill-fated attempts to actually create working guilds — clearly a step well beyond mere theorizing, even if a failed one — such a view does not do justice either to the backgrounds of some key NGL activists or to the close interest that others, most obviously G.D.H. Cole, took in the shop stewards’ movement.

*The Guildsman* was founded and initially edited by John Paton, in Glasgow. Following his early death, at the age of only thirty-four, his obituary, as well as noting his recent work as manager of *The Guildsman* and as organizing secretary of the NGL, gave an account of how, having been trained as an engine fitter and having “roughed it for some time in America,” Paton had “worked in the drawing office and returned to the shops, soon becoming the most prominent shop steward in his native Paisley.”
At the beginning of 1918, *The Guildsman* declared on its front page: “The Shop Stewards are the back-bone of the trade unions!” And, although there were some criticisms of Murphy’s *The Workers’ Committee*, the NGL annual conference of that year was “unanimous in welcoming the Shop Stewards’ movement as a force of infinite possibilities for the attainment by the workers of the control of industry.” *The Guildsman* continued to follow Murphy’s views closely enough to take issue with him later in 1918, when he changed his line and advocated “complete severance from the established organisations” in *Solidarity*, the organ of the shop stewards’ movement. *The Guildsman* argued that craft unions were on their way out, in any case, and that the road forward, especially in the engineering industry, should be joint recognition of shop stewards by several unions. “Unofficial” committees were not likely to succeed “since workers will not readily forsake their Unions to follow groups of men whose only recommendation is revolutionary opinions they detest.”

The issue of the organization’s name was debated again at the NGL’s fourth annual conference in 1919. There was a clear correlation between the positions taken on this issue and attitudes towards the Bolsheviks. The proposal to change the name to the “Guild Socialist League” was moved by the London Group, which believed that “the present name is vague and misleading.” There was some support for the motion, but also opposition, from, inevitably, Reckitt, who argued that it was rather “late in the day to make a fetish of the word Socialism. It is inadequate and inaccurate, has a myriad of interpretations, nearly all nasty.” Opposition also came from Paton, who was afraid of being associated with “bureaucratic Fabianism.” The original instigator of the suggested change, Cole, then made the defeat of the proposal more or less inevitable. Although he had intended the change of name “to exclude from the League people who were not Socialists,” he said, it had now become clear that the new name would exclude “too many others.” The vote was lost, with about two-thirds of those present rejecting the proposal.

By the time the fifth conference was held in the summer of 1920, disagreements within the NGL had moved on from arguments over its
name. The process that was to lead to the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain occupied much of the attention of many on the Left at this time. Accordingly, the issues that caused The Guildsman to anticipate, in April 1920, the “biggest crisis of its career” for the NGL concerned “the Soviet system, democracy, and ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’”:

First there is a tendency represented by the present majority on the Executive. This section has manifestly scant belief in the triumph of Socialism by the constitutional accession to power of a parliamentary majority. It welcomes the Soviet as an instrument for the overthrow and supersession of capitalism; it desires to expunge the reference to “a democratic state” from the constitution of the League; and it expects Socialism to be brought about not by a converted majority, but by an energetic minority. It has clearly no objection to the principle of proletarian dictatorship, and we may add, it clearly regards Guild Socialism as a form of Socialism and the Guild more as part of the Socialist movement. . . .

At the other extreme stands the group led by Mr Reckitt and the Executive minority. This group dissents from resolutions dealing with “Democracy” and “The Soviet System,” and Mr Reckitt and certain others have put down a resolution of their own which is probably a direct negative of the former. In this they categorically repudiate the dictatorship of the proletariat.²⁹

The next issue of The Guildsman demonstrated the accuracy of this analysis. Arthur J. Penty, then a member of the NGL executive,³⁰ believed that if the resolution concerning soviets were passed it would “entirely change the character of the League from being a body which seeks to guide the Labour movement by the quality of its thought to one that seeks to stampede it by the violence of its opinions.” After a brief period of triumph, it would “dwindle into impotence,” caught up in a reaction against Bolshevism. A.E. Baker questioned the way that the “supporters of the resolution on Soviets and Minority Dictatorship, proclaiming themselves the left wing of the Guild movement,
assume their opponents to be relatively on the right.” This raised, he said, the question of “Leftwardness.” He could only suppose “that a movement far enough to the extreme left reaches the extreme right — a proposition with which Professor Einstein would agree.” Reckitt declared that if the NGL was faced with the challenge “‘your democracy or your life,’ they had better surrender the life of the League than the most vital of its social principles.”

Representing the other side of the argument, a letter from Ellen C. Wilkinson of the Manchester Group concluded by insisting:

The question posed by the “Soviets and Democracy” resolutions on the Conference agenda can be reduced simply to this. Is the National Guilds League content to amuse itself with its box of bricks, or will it range itself with the revolutionaries throughout Europe who are working for an immediate revolution, offering the Guild theory as its contribution to the building of communist society after the transfer- ence of power has taken place? 31

Matters came to a head at the conference, whose “most striking feature,” according to The Guildsman, was “the appearance of two parties — a right wing and a left wing,” something the paper attributed to the influence of the “Russian movement.” The tone of its report on the conference was light-hearted. “The Chairman’s error in putting the ‘revolution’ to the vote was greeted with loud applause,” it commented, adding: “In the course of the discussion Cole, Mellor and Page Arnot were compared to Robespierre, Danton and Marat, and Hobson was asked whether he would be prepared to take the role of Charlotte Corday. The suggestion that there was a Judas in the League led to some competition for the part amongst the stalwarts of the extreme Left.” Meanwhile, “another speaker elicited a formal (and necessary) protest by suggesting that the Left were the sort of people who did not drink and held eccentric views on marriage.”

Light-heartedness could not disguise fundamental differences of opinion, but it is interesting that, even though, as The Guildsman reported, “the Lefts had a working majority of 67 to 55” and the “Soviets”
resolution was “decided on strict party lines,” which reasserted themselves at the end of the conference in the vote on “League Policy,” the fourteen other motions on the agenda were carried unanimously or by large majorities. And, as was reportedly the case with other British supporters of the Bolsheviks in these years, those who presented themselves as members of the “Left” were at pains to insist on the independence of their judgement: “P.H. Cohen led a forlorn hope in the shape of an amendment proposing to rule out parliamentary action entirely. Being told that he was out-Lenining Lenin himself, he replied that he was not to be dictated to by Lenin or any other man. This display of spirit was much appreciated.”

The conference was followed by a stormy aftermath, centring on the “policy pamphlet” that it had instructed should be drawn up. In the meantime, Rowland Kenney, in an ironic letter to The Guildsman despairing of “Our Faction Fight,” argued that those on “the Left” were concentrating on the wrong things from their own point of view:

Machine gun practice and the study of street fighting, the acquisition, equipment and arming of aircraft, the manufacture of tanks and poison gas, these are the matters that should surely be occupying their time. Men consciously and deliberately working for revolution by force in England — with its absolutely dependable armed forces and its powerful anti-revolutionary groups — surely cannot hope to achieve much by agreeing on a few phrases like “dictatorship of the proletariat” and then sitting down to wait for a discontented mob to make the revolution they intend to guide into fruitful activities for establishing a more ideal state.

What is clear is that the focus of the argument had shifted. The guild movement had always opposed the notion that the parliamentary system was, or could be developed into, an adequate approximation of democracy. The movement had always campaigned for “industrial democracy.” In 1918 and 1919, the question had been whether soviet democracy had some degree of reality in Russia or whether, as Bechhofer argued, the Bolsheviks had decisively crushed its early
flowering. In the spring of 1919, G.D.H. Cole had given a series of lectures in London, in which, according to *The Guildsman*, he referred to “the Russian Soviet Government providing so interesting an experiment in the political organisation of society.” Here was the familiar experiment metaphor yet again:

He did not actually advocate swallowing the Soviet system whole, explaining that it expressed a need rather than a theory and was, to a certain extent improvised, but suggested that the most interesting fact was the tendency to divide, to set up workshop committees, for the controlling of industry, leaving the rest to local soviets linked up federally in a Central Soviet, and a National Congress of Soviets. These two facts — the separate representation of industry and politics and the federal organisation of the State — are what commend the Soviet system to Cole’s mind.34

By 1920, with the long, drawn-out creation of the CPGB about to come to fruition and the Left Wing of the ILP aspiring to lead their party into a Third International, which was insisting on the endorsement of “the Dictatorship of the Proletariat,” the issue for NGL members was whether this doctrine could be reconciled with soviet democracy,” or indeed with any kind of democracy at all, however limited — and, if so, how. The publication of Kautsky’s assault on the concept and its practice by the Bolsheviks was a factor in crystallizing the issues at stake.

*The “Aunt Sally of the Third International”*

The ILP and *Labour Leader* were equivocal about soviet democracy and generally prone, for a surprisingly long time, to giving the Bolsheviks the benefit of the doubt. Yet it was the ILP’s National Labour Press that published Karl Kautsky’s *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, translated by H.J. Stenning, at the beginning of 1920. It was advertised in *Labour Leader* as an “incisive criticism of Class Dictatorship and a powerful defence of democratic government, by the greatest Socialist writer on the Continent.”35 Kautsky, “in the pre-war years the veritable
pope of the Second International,” was a key critic of Bolshevism—arguably the key critic. There was nothing equivocal about his response. Although he certainly had support among the “reformists” of Britain, their overall reaction to his work was nowhere near as positive as might be expected, while the response of “revolutionaries” was, as would be anticipated, totally negative.

At the end of the January 1920, John Scurr reviewed Kautsky’s book for Labour Leader. He anticipated a “storm” when readers realized that “Karl Kautsky regards the revolution in Russia as being the last middle-class revolution rather than the first Socialist.” It was “middle class or bureaucratic inasmuch as a party seizes power and exercises it.” And, like so many others, Scurr stressed that the soviet republic was “an experiment, an experiment carried out under peculiar and exceptional circumstances,” in a country whose social and economic conditions were vastly different from those of Western Europe. But socialism “as a means to the emancipation of the proletariat, without the self-government and good-will of the people is unthinkable.” And he concluded with a ringing endorsement of the book: “Everyone who reads the Labour Leader must buy this book. I congratulate the I.L.P. on its courage in publishing it. It stimulates thought on every page.”

Yet it had taken a rather long time for a book of such importance to be translated and published in Britain. After all, it had been written well over two years earlier, in August 1918, before the end of the war. The New Statesman reviewer, writing in March, was much less impressed than Scurr. Kautsky’s opus had to share critical scrutiny with three other works, one of which was Lenin’s State and Revolution. The (anonymous) reviewer identified Kautsky as “the principal theoretical exponent of ‘orthodox’ German Social Democracy” and noted that he and Lenin shared “an intense desire to prove their respective points by citing the authority of Karl Marx.” But the contest was not an equal one, since “Lenin’s book is immeasurably better argued and has infinitely more life in it than Kautsky’s somewhat pedestrian effort”:
Kautsky enters the field as a “democrat” and combats the theory of “dictatorship” from a “democratic” standpoint. He somewhat misunderstands the Bolshevik position when he assumes that its essence lies in the establishment of Socialism by a minority movement. That is not its essence and it would be a point of indifference to Lenin whether his violent revolution was made by a majority or a minority, provided that it is made by enough to secure its success. The essence of the “dictatorship” position lies in the assumption that every State is a class State and that a “democratic State” in any real sense is impossible. The character of the State depends on the character of the coercive organisations which are its instruments, and while opposing classes exist, one of these classes is bound to dominate the State. If this is true, clearly a dictatorial proletarian State is the only alternative to a dictatorial capitalist State. The argument for “democracy” which Kautsky interprets on somewhat narrow orthodox political lines is therefore not very effective against Bolshevik theory.  

The *New Statesman* was not the only critic of the appeal to Marxist orthodoxy. From a very different perspective, and before Kautsky’s book appeared in English, an article in *The Socialist* — Klara Zetkin’s “Through Dictatorship to Democracy” — was presented by its author as a response to “Comrade Kautsky.” If the reformists of the *New Statesman* were equivocal, the revolutionaries of the SLP were not going to be exposed to any doubts. Zetkin was not impressed either by Kautsky’s or by “Comrade Martoff’s” citing of Marx’s writings in support of their position. What did it matter, she wrote, if “having at first been inclined to a ‘Jacobin’ outlook,” Marx “subsequently came rather to adopt an ‘evolutionist’ and ‘parliamentary’ view”? Historical evolution “was not arrested when the pen fell from Marx’s hand.”

When the English translation appeared, *The Socialist* reviewer, R.M. Fox, found the book “interesting” but insisted that Kautsky’s comparison between Wilhelm Weitling and the Bolsheviks broke down because “the Bolsheviks do believe in democracy in a socialist community.” They were “simply endeavouring to make a condition of
real democracy possible.” Once it was admitted that the workers, as a class, had the right to carry out their will, the right to vote became irrelevant. Kautsky might cite Marx on “the Civil War in France,” but Marx “believed we must ignore the other side and use our sledgehammer majority to carry out our work irrespective of them.” And, in reality, Kautsky knew very well that “in a society of classes, one class must rule and that democracy is impossible.”

Whatever the merits or shortcomings of Kautsky’s book, British “Bolsheviks” did not have to wait long for a vehement response from Lenin himself. On the first of April, The Call announced: “In Press, Lenin replies to Kautsky [in] ‘The Proletarian Revolution and Kautsky the Renegade.’” Three weeks later, Tom Quelch provided readers with “An Appreciation” of Lenin’s reply: “This book is a fierce polemic. It is hot and strong. There is a flavour of Tertullian, a touch of Calvin, in the Communist sense, about this keen proletarian theoretician.” Quelch presented Kautsky as “the intellectual head and front of all those proletarian forces which still fall under the spell of social patriots.” Lenin’s work had, he said, effectively demolished the arguments of “those who still adhere to pre-war Socialist concepts of bourgeois parliamentarism; it tells why it is necessary to shatter the capitalist State, and to replace it with the Soviet system, and to establish the worker’s dictatorship.”

Kautsky insisted that “democracy is the essential basis for building up a Socialist system of production.” A Letter from Lenin: Greetings to Communists Abroad,” published in May 1920 in the Workers’ Dreadnought, rejected this as cant:

The hatred which the capitalists of Russia and of the outside world feel towards the Soviet Republic is camouflaged by high-sounding phrases about “real democracy.” The fraternity of exploiters is true to its own tradition; it represents bourgeois democracy to be the “democracy” and it includes all the Philistines, including Messrs. Adler, Kautzky [sic], and the majority of the leaders of the “independent social-democratic party” of Germany, which is independent of the revolutionary proletariat, but dependent on petty bourgeois prejudices.
Hitherto, “phrases about ‘real democracy’” were more likely to refer, without the quotation marks, to the soviet variety. In the case of the *Dreadnought*, the shift of emphasis visible in Lenin’s letter would not be a permanent one, but it is indicative of the direction in which much of “Bolshevik” opinion in Britain was moving.

By the end of that year, 1920, the Communist Party of Great Britain (in reality still little more than a name-change for the BSP) had been formed, and *The Call* had become *The Communist*. C.M. Roebuck, reviewing Kautsky’s *Terrorism and Communism*, was predictably scathing about its author, “whom once we should have called ‘Comrade,’” after Kautsky’s latest attack on Bolshevism had been published — like the earlier book, by the National Labour Press:

Kautsky’s desertion of the fundamentals of Marxism, in his notorious “Dictatorship of the Proletariat”— so readily published by his British co-religionists in the N.A.C. of the Independent Labour Party — has already been exposed and branded with the infamy it deserves by Comrade Lenin in his book on the “Proletarian Revolution and Kautsky the Renegade” and Comrade Trotsky has produced, by snatches of work at 3 o’clock in the morning . . . a crushing and complete exposure of Kautsky’s historical errors and political methods.45

Early in the new year, Trotsky’s response to Kautsky was advertised in *The Communist* as “ready shortly.”46 In the meantime, a *New Statesman* review of *Terrorism and Communism* — grouped with Bertrand Russell’s *Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* under the title “The Bolsheviks Contra Mundum” — had noted that “Kautsky has become a kind of Aunt Sally for Lenin and the Third International.”47

For its part, *The Communist* was not short of “domestic” Aunt Sallys — particularly when it could link them to the international one. In August 1921, in a disparaging report on the recent congress of the “little band of Hyndmanites known as the Social Democratic Federation” (the NSP having reverted to its older name by this time), *The Communist* noted that, according to reports, Kautsky had said
in a letter that he was “following with pleasure” the SDF’s “campaign against Bolshevism.”

The most surprising aspect of the response of the British Left to Kautsky’s critique of Bolshevism is, surely, the dismissive attitude of the New Statesman reviewer. But consideration of this response has taken us somewhat ahead of the sequence of events. By 1921, it was clear that the British Communist movement that had now emerged had as its core the old BSP, to which adhered a number of smaller fragments of the Left. A year earlier, however, it had seemed possible, even at some stages likely, that something closer to the pattern of the French “split” after the Tours congress would make the ILP the largest Left component bent on affiliation to the Third International. That this did not take place had a great deal to do with perceptions of the meaning of the phrase that became more and more dominant in left-wing discourse — “the dictatorship of the proletariat.”