THE EARLY BRITISH COMMUNIST PARTY
Soviet Democracy Deferred and Redefined

The First Step to Socialism: A Labour Government

In the early days of the Bolshevik revolution, the British Socialist Party was as contemptuous of bourgeois parliamentary democracy and as committed to the soviet variety as the “ultra-Left” elements of the SLP and Pankhurst’s Communist Workers. H. Alexander and E.C. Fairchild had found — to their apparent surprise — little support for their reservations about soviet democracy during the debate with Theodore Rothstein in The Call during the summer of 1919. A year later, the BSP was to form the initial core of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Other elements that joined the new party — from the SLP, the CP (BST1), and the “Left Wing” of the ILP — had been at least equally enthusiastic proponents of the soviet system. The same was broadly true of recruits from among the guild socialists.

Yet it soon became evident that adhesion to the “official”
Communist line meant, for Britain at least, the deferment to a more distant time of the promotion, and ultimately of the reality, of soviet democracy. Moreover, with regard to perceptions of Russian soviet democracy, a process of change was set in motion that led towards the development of a version of the ideal of soviet democracy that reconciled it, to the satisfaction of its adherents, with the actual Communist dictatorship in Russia. This accompanied and was in fact integral to the emergence of the vanguard party theory and the centralization, or “Bolshevizing,” of the British Communist Party itself, along with a radical downgrading of any notion of internal democracy. The conversion of some of the most prominent former advocates of soviet democracy “from below” aided the acceptance of the new interpretation.

Deferment concerned the prospects for soviet democracy in Britain. Even before the formation of the CPGB in the summer of 1920, while Left Communists and the radical shop stewards of Solidarity insisted on attempting the immediate creation of workplace-based workers’ committees, The Call (soon to become The Communist) saw the need for an intermediate step in the coming social revolution. By May 1920, the BSP’s paper was already emphasizing the need for a radical vanguard, as well as supporting Labour Party affiliation for the future Communist Party. “The Social Revolution must be ushered in by a class-conscious minority,” it argued, “which if not passively supported by the masses, then at least must not have the masses actively or passively opposed to them.” The majority in Britain would support Labour, and therefore a Labour government was “the necessary preliminary to the Communist Revolution.” This step was needed to shake the working class out of its delusions. As a result of Labour’s election, workers would learn “the sham of Representative Government and the inevitability of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.” Communists should therefore abstain from activity that “might harm the prospects of the Labour Party.” Later, the continued refusal of Labour to accept the affiliation of the CPGB failed to modify this position.

Not that there was any shortage of criticism of the Labour Party, particularly as regards its views concerning Russia. In 1922, The
The Communist was scathing about Labour’s condemnation of the trial and execution of twelve leaders of the Social Revolutionary Party.² Nor were all CP members happy with the policy of Labour Party affiliation. The Musselburgh branch registered its disapproval. Nevertheless, it expressed its determination to carry out the party executive’s instructions to withdraw candidates standing against Labour — a manifestation, said The Communist, “of our desire to form a working-class united front against capitalism.”³

Any moves to implement soviet democracy were to be postponed until after a Labour government had been elected and shown wanting, with a consequent shift of allegiance to the Communists and the precipitation of a “revolutionary situation.” In the meantime, the CPGB would continue to pursue Labour Party affiliation. The logic of this was to make the election of a Labour government the initial step on the road to socialism and to postpone any immediate prospect of soviet democracy in Britain.

Redefinition Begins: Democracy . . . or Ergatocracy?

Advocates of the “soviet system” had usually been content to contrast “bourgeois democracy” with “proletarian democracy.” The latter, otherwise known as “soviet democracy,” was presented as infinitely more authentic. But was not “democracy” — the rule of an indeterminate “people” — an irredeemably bourgeois concept? Did not the rule of the workers mean a new departure, a transition to something superior to democracy? For some, this was clearly so.

Morgan Philips Price, the pro-Bolshevik Manchester Guardian correspondent, was an articulate advocate of the superiority of the soviets. In a series of articles in the Workers’ Dreadnought, he counterpoised — in one of his sub-headings — “Soviet System Versus Democracy.” A “democratic state,” he argued, recognized “no economic divisions in the electorate,” and everyone was regarded as part of what was “vaguely called ‘the people.’” But soviets provided “the economic apparatus” that was able “to represent the workers’ special interests and . . . reconcile them with the interests of the community.”⁴
Eden and Cedar Paul took the process of dropping the term democracy as applied to the soviets one step further. For them, the correct way to describe the working-class rule exemplified by the soviets was their own coining: ergatocracy — the rule of the workers. They outlined their position in May 1919, in a letter to the Workers’ Dreadnought that sought to explain why they were resigning from both the ILP and the BSP. The “purely political type of social organisation” had, they argued, outlived its usefulness; the future lay with the new type of industrial organisation, the workers’ committees and the shop stewards’ movement. There was in the socialist movement, they maintained, “a hopeless divergence between those who expect to realise socialism through political democracy and those who expect to realise it through Communist ergatocracy — the administration of the workers by the workers — with (as a preliminary stage) the dictatorship of the proletariat exercised through workers’ committees or soviets.” This argument was developed in their book, Creative Revolution: A Study of Communist Ergatocracy (1920). Unsurprisingly, the neologism was not one destined to enter general discourse. Meanwhile, the Comintern was busy redefining the revolutionary role of the soviets.

The Role of the Soviets: Zinoviev’s “Theses”

As we have seen, in the earliest years of Bolshevik rule the superiority of the soviet system over so-called bourgeois forms of democracy was as much part of the stock in trade of The Call as of other left-wing publications that identified with the idea of soviet democracy. But now the emphasis in accounts of this “higher form of democracy” was shifting from what had earlier been seen as a spontaneous creation by the workers towards something that suggested foresight and planning on Lenin’s part. Early in 1920, The Call reviewed Lenin’s pamphlet Towards Soviets,” which, it said, had given the very earliest formulation to the soviet idea, in 1917, and had correctly anticipated “not only the trend of events, but also the objections forthcoming from Socialist opponents of ‘dictatorship and Soviet rule’.” Time had proved him
right; soviets were “higher in type than a parliamentary republic from the point of view of workers’ control.”

Later that year, with the new British party now formed, Zinoviev’s “Theses” — adopted by the Third International and, as we have seen, the target of much criticism from the Left Wing — laid down three conditions necessary for the organization of soviets: a “great revolutionary impulse,” an acute political and economic crisis, and a serious decision “in the minds of considerable masses of workers, and first to all in the ranks of the Communist Party” to begin the final struggle for power. In the absence of these conditions, the idea of soviet democracy should be promulgated but no action to form soviets taken. Soviets without a revolution were impossible — they would become a “parody of Soviets.” This was a crucial difference in point of view. For the Third International and therefore for the CPGB, soviets, prior to the revolution, were essentially a mechanism for seizing power. Until revolution appeared imminent, they might be advocated in a general way, but they were actually to be set up only at the beginning of a definite revolutionary crisis, the advent of which would be determined by the Communist Party itself. In contrast, those whom the Communists now termed the “ultra-Left” saw the promotion of embryonic soviet democracy, which seemed to prefigure the communist society of the future, as an immediate and essential task in preparing the way for revolution.

How could the new society based on working-class self-organization possibly function without the workers being well prepared for this form of democracy? How could promoting this new form of democracy possibly co-exist with participation in the discredited and irredeemably bourgeois versions of democracy? Hence, as we have seen, the rejection by Pankhurst and other “anti-parliamentarians” of any involvement in the politics of parliamentary and local government elections. And though the SLP dissented from this view to the extent of perceiving a necessity for involvement in “bourgeois” electoral politics, it, too, gave priority to trying to build a working-class participatory organization, in the form of the Workers’ International Industrial Union.
The Communist — a “transmogrified” Call, as Willie Thompson puts it in The Good Old Cause — began publication immediately following the formation of the CPGB. Billing itself “An Organ of the Third (Communist) International” published by the Communist Party’s executive committee, it ran as a weekly from 5 August 1920 until 3 February 1923, when it was replaced by the Workers’ Weekly, which Thompson characterizes as “the recognisable ancestor not only of the subsequent Daily Worker but also of the latter-day journals of the British far left, like Militant and Socialist Worker.”

Throughout its existence, there were hardly any invocations of soviet democracy in The Communist — far fewer, especially, than in the Dreadnought during the same period. For the CPGB, emphasis was shifting decisively to the need for a “dictatorship of the proletariat” and to the necessity for the Communist Party itself to assume the role of leader in bringing this about.

The Dictatorship of the Proletariat: From Class to Party
As we saw in our discussion of the dictatorship of the proletariat (chapter 7), the emphasis had initially been on class rather than party and also on the brevity of the period of dictatorship that was perceived as inevitable and necessary. The role of the working class in the coming revolution would be a direct one, and the transition to socialism, indeed to communism, would be short. In an article titled “The Dictatorship of the Proletariat,” which appeared in The Call in the summer of 1917, months before the Bolsheviks came to power, the future Communist MP J.T. Walton Newbold emphasized the perceived impatience of the proletariat with reformist half-measures. The working class would not be satisfied with “that social-co-partnery known as Guild Socialism; with the democratisation of the State; the consumer’s safeguard for protection against himself, the producer,” but would instead bring “the capitalist system of civilisation” to an end, “now or in the not far distant future.”

The following year, with the end of the war at last in sight, The Call published Dora Montefiore’s article “How Socialism Will Be
Realised.” As we saw in chapter 7, Montefiore foresaw the triumph of socialism by “the end of four years of peace,” following “a temporary revolutionary Dictatorship of the People,” which she equated with the contemporary wartime state direction and restrictions in Britain. In much the same spirit, soon after the formation of the CPGB, the party’s first manifesto ended with the injunction to “CONCENTRATE UPON WORKERS’ CONTROL” and the statement that “The Workers ALONE CAN FREE the working class.”

But party was soon elbowing class aside — or, rather, party was soon to be declared more or less interchangeable with class. Reports from the Comintern Second Congress were featured in the early issues of The Communist, with more of Zinoviev’s strictures on the soviets given prominence. “The Soviet system not only did not exclude the idea of a proletarian party, but, on the contrary, presupposed it,” he insisted. He dismissed the claim by “people like Kautsky” that what existed in Russia was a dictatorship of the party rather than of the proletariat. One followed from the other, he argued, “since the Party is merely the organisation of the most advanced elements of the working class.”

The focus of The Communist came to centre on the obstacles the Bolsheviks had faced: civil war, intervention, and the machinations of counter-revolutionaries. Harsh, authoritarian Bolshevik measures were unavoidable. These measures were retrospectively alluded to, explained but not portrayed in detail, in T.A. Jackson and R.W. Postgate’s “The Story of the Russian Revolution,” which began serialization in The Communist in November 1921. The responsibility for repression was placed firmly with the perfidious behaviour of opponents of the Bolsheviks who had attacked the revolutionary regime with total ruthlessness:

The Extra-Ordinary Commission and the Soviet authorities replied by producing a mass terror against the enemies of the Revolution. Upon the details of this we have no need to dwell. The whole country was in a chaos of conflicting pressures, and the enemies of the Republic had
shown themselves utterly without scruple in their determination to compass its downfall. The Soviet Republic had no choice but to cast away scruples likewise, and deal with the wild beastlike attacks in the only possible way.\textsuperscript{14}

The assumption among British Bolshevik supporters had been that the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat would be very brief, but now the end to this phase seemed to be retreating rapidly into the distance — and the role of the proletariat itself along with it. The decisive shift of emphasis from class to party was clearly completed when, early in 1923, the \textit{Workers' Weekly}, which had just replaced \textit{The Communist}, reported on a meeting of the “Communist Party Council.” The report included the text of a resolution, moved by Tom Bell, which decreed that “only the workers’ government, consisting of Communists, can be the embodiment of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”\textsuperscript{15} This shift from class to party was accompanied by, and complementary to, the “Bolshevization” of the CPGB.

\textit{“Bolshevization” and Democratic Centralism}

Calls for tight party discipline had been made even before the British Communist Party came formally into being. In spite of Pankhurst’s notions about rival “Left” and “Right” Communist parties or “Left blocks” within the party, there could, of course, be only one, monolithic, party. Robert Williams, secretary of the National Transport Workers’ Federation and soon to be the BSP’s “national” delegate at the founding conference of the CPGB, was to be expelled, even before Sylvia Pankhurst, following the Triple Alliance’s failure to support the miners on Black Friday. But on the eve of the formation of the new party, he was very much in favour of party discipline. He believed, he told \textit{Daily Herald} readers in the fourth of his “Impressions of Soviet Russia” articles, “more and more in discipline and organisation. Dictatorship first of all to break down the capitalist system, and then strict military and industrial discipline in order to establish the Socialist or Communist state.” And a week later, in \textit{The Call}, W.H. Ryde made
a plea for “voluntary, rigid discipline,” concluding that “we should be Communists first and trade unionists, co-operators, and the like after.”

As always, the example of Russia was inspirational. Dora Montefiore had been elected, together with five others (all men), to form the provisional committee of the party. She praised George Young’s recent *Observer* article about a visit to Russia, quoting his view that “devotion and discipline are organised into a ‘Red Army,’ or more accurately perhaps into a Religious order — the Communist Party. . . . They are the First Hundred Thousand — a missionary and militant Lenin as Loyola.” Montefiore commented: “Nothing finer could be told of these men and women.” In the same issue, *The Communist* reported that the Third International had summoned “all elements standing for the mass struggle for proletarian dictatorship” to unite “under the guidance of a centralised party of the revolutionary proletariat.”

A fortnight later came Zinoviev’s version of how Communist MPs — once there were any — should operate. He insisted that “the parliamentary group must be wholly in the hands of the Central Committee of the Communist Party.” Somewhat ironically, in the same issue *The Communist* reported that the CPGB had received a letter from Arthur Henderson, the Labour Party secretary. Henderson had written to confirm that the CPGB’s application to affiliate to the Labour Party had been turned down — something that made the likelihood that there would be, in the foreseeable future, enough Communist MPs to form a parliamentary group more remote than ever.

Very soon the CPGB as a whole became the target of “Communist Discipline.” In an article so titled, Albert H. Hawkins wrote in October 1920 that it was “necessary to examine our Party machinery and outlook in order that anything which contravenes the spirit of the Russian Revolution may be speedily remedied.” The Russian party was synonymous with discipline, whereas “we have confused democracy as an ideal of government with democracy as a matter of political tactics. This needs alteration.” He continued:
The Communists have declared their adhesion to the policy of the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” realising that pure and unqualified democracy is not practicable during a revolutionary period or a time of transition. This abandonment of democracy for the time being must be carried into the party organisation in order that our forces may be used to the greatest possible advantage. 19

The conference of the CPGB at Easter 1921 was not without some signs of internal debate — even dissent. The Communist reported a “splendid debate” about the powers of the executive committee. Some delegates (those from Central South Wales and Tooting were mentioned) wanted “some check” by “locality against the centre.” The Communist interpreted this as a throwback to earlier attitudes triggered by memories of betrayals on the part of trade union leadership. Such anachronistic responses were swept aside, it assured readers, when William Mellor made the case for “centralised power,” declaring that “a revolutionary organisation must have a central driving force able to issue orders and to enforce them.” But the soviets were not completely forgotten. The conference urged “the adoption of the Soviet or Workers’ Council system so successfully applied in Russia.” 20

By the autumn of 1921, there were already indications of the direction the party was heading, including the introduction of the key notion of “democratic centralism.” This first appeared in the pages of The Communist on 17 September 1921, in the same issue as a front-page report on Pankhurst’s expulsion from the party. In an article titled “Party Organisation,” Tom Bell declared, under the sub-heading “Democratic Centralism”:

Formal democracy, which is the curse of most institutions outside the Communist Party, represents a splitting of the organisation into active functionaries and passive masses. Proletarian democracy rejects formalism for the living association of common endeavour i.e. an active living organisation of struggle working up through a centralised leadership. This centralisation does not merely exist on paper; it is derived from the development and maintenance of living associations and mutual
relations within the Party. Between the directing organs and the members. In other words, formal democracy produces bureaucracy and promotes anarchism. Proletarian democracy or democratic centralism is an efficient instrument which the membership feels is fundamental for the successful carrying out common activity and struggle. It represents live contact from the lowest unit of the organisation or individual membership right up to the central leadership and *vice versa* from the centre to the several units.

Another article stressed the binding nature, for every Communist, of the “instructions and resolutions of the International” and the powers of the central committee: “The representatives of the Central Committee or comrades authorised by it are to be admitted to all meetings, *with a deciding voice.*”

The key stage in the “Bolshevization” of the CPGB began in 1922. Kevin Morgan has called attention to the crucial role of the Comintern control commission’s emissary, Jakob Friis. With encouragement and pressure from this quarter, the party conference took place that spring. It determined, *The Communist* declared, that the party would go forward united, “welded into an homogenous body.” The conference ratified “the Theses on the International Situation, Revolutionary Tactics, and Tactics of the Russian Communist Party” and set up a commission, in the words of Gallacher, “to go into the whole question of party workings with a view to applying the new methods of organisation with the least amount of disturbance of the Party as it now exists.” There was some disagreement about the scope of the enquiry, an issue that, on Gallacher’s advice, was referred back to the executive. There were also differing views on the commission’s composition. It was decided by 87 to 38 to select it from outside the executive. The result was announced a little later: Harry Inkpin (Albert’s brother) and Harry Pollitt, with Palme Dutt chairing. The commission was set the task of making detailed recommendations to the executive and to the annual conference “for the application of the theses.” It would have access to all information,
but no executive powers, and would “issue short reports on its work from time to time.”

A second conference followed in the autumn of 1922. In a report titled “A Strong Central Lead,” The Communist commented: “We have grown out of the old childishness of insurrectionary posing and of democratic sentimentalising. The essential task of the Conference is the setting up of a strong and efficient central leadership.” The conference had adopted, “without dissent or opposition,” the commission’s proposals. “For the first time in the history of the working-class movement in this country, a single centralized organisation of the revolutionary forces has been established,” the paper concluded, with evident satisfaction.

Early the next year, an article titled “Rebuilding the Communist Party” recorded “considerable progress in the re-building of the Communist Party on the lines of the Theses of the Communist International.”

Desertions from the Left

The process of Bolshevization certainly accelerated during 1922, and its outcome came to be more consciously sought. But long before that the tide in that direction was marked by some notable desertions from the cause of true soviet democracy as perceived by “Left-Wing” Communists. These must have had a considerable impact, given the prominence of those involved. As early as 1920, the startling change in the thinking of J.T. Murphy that we noted in the introduction, from a purist “bottom-up” to a determinedly “top-down” approach, was already well underway.

Murphy had started 1920 as member of the SLP. Reviewing Robert Michels’s Political Parties (translated by Cedar and Eden Paul) for The Socialist at the beginning of the year, he asked: “Who has not witnessed the new organisation come into being, observed the small groups, enthusiastically, democratically, carrying on their business, growing in numbers and losing their democracy in spite of their profession?” But he had rejected Michels’s idea of the inevitability of oligarchy; it was too much of a “sweeping statement”: 
Even in Soviet Russia wherein the highest form of democratic organisation has been evolved, the conflict with capitalism modifies it and compels a degree of subordination which would be unnecessary had the class struggle ceased. Yet the whole answer to Michels’ conclusions are [sic] there. 27

Initially, at least, Murphy had also rejected the line taken by the Communist Unity Group. In a letter from Hamburg dated 10 April 1920, which The Socialist editor called “illuminating in the extreme,” Murphy still saw the BSP as a body lacking revolutionary credentials and warned of the “grave danger of the Communist International being infected with compromise.” 28 In “The S.L.P. and Unity — An Open Letter to the Party” (and a very long one), he identified the SLP, approvingly, as “the Extreme Left.” The SLP, he declared, had more in common with the anti-parliamentary Workers’ Socialist Federation and South Wales Socialist Society than with the BSP, which only “under protest” had withdrawn from the Labour Party. “Better a Communist Party without the B.S.P. than a party including the B.S.P. trailing with it the spirit of compromise to hamper the party in revolutionary practice.” But at the same time this open letter signalled a break with Murphy’s past. It concluded:

A Revolutionary Party needs strong leadership, strong centralisation, and rigid discipline.

P.S. This letter may be quoted against some of my previous utterances, well, so much for those utterances. 29

That was in May 1920. By November, Murphy’s transition was nearly complete. Writing in the Dreadnought, still the organ of the CP (BSTI), Murphy began by quoting Zinoviev and other Bolshevik leaders, with whose views on the need for “iron discipline” and “democratic centralism” he agreed. The problem for British Communists was that, perhaps more so than anywhere else in the world, “capitalistic notions of democracy have so saturated the social and political life of a people.” As a result, the “pleas for referendums and local autonomy”
were common in all parties, and “rank and file control by way of the ballot-box” had become for many the exclusive test of such control. But now, “under the impulse of the Communist International and the growing intensity of the class war,” the fight against such notions had opened in earnest. Such things as “referendums and local autonomy” could be promoted “so long as the revolutionary movement was confined to propaganda,” but the entire conception of the movement was changing. This shift was occurring because of the growing realization that the movement was a revolutionary and insurrectionary struggle involving the penetration of numerous organisations, the harnessing of forces leading to open conflict, the mobilisation and direction of the masses first in this direction and then in that, according to the exigencies of the situation developed by the waging of war against the capitalist class, each step fraught with grave consequences, and toleration of looseness in organisation and lack of decisiveness and quick responsive action, becomes a veritable menace to the working class. We are the revolutionary army waging a many-fronted war, and an army that is not organised in such a manner that it can act in unison and work to a definite plan of campaign is destined to failure.30

There were still faint echoes of Murphy’s syndicalist years in another Dreadnought article, published the following week, in which he called for “a shaping of the Party with a deeper regard for industry than hitherto.” Otherwise, little remained that was reminiscent of his earlier stance. The party’s executive was to exercise unfettered power between national congresses, with “no antiquated limitations of the referendum etc.,” he wrote. “The General Staff of an army cannot take a ballot vote of the army before each battle to see if the rank and file are willing to fight.” The executive should not be elected by a ballot of the membership; most members would know nothing about the majority of names on the list. Subcommittees of the executive should exercise the full powers of the parent body between meetings of the latter. Control by the membership would be exercised by “opportunities for recall,”
which were “a far more effective method of keeping the organisation at its highest pitch than the old methods of referendum etc.” It had to be remembered, Murphy said, that the party was not required to think out basic principles and policy. These were all to be found in the theses of the Second Congress of the Communist International. The party’s task was simply their application.31

A second sad defection, from the standpoint of Left Communists, and particularly in the eyes of Sylvia Pankhurst, was that of another former leading light of the shop stewards’ movement, Willie Gallacher. As in the case of Murphy, the crucial moment in his conversion to the orthodox Bolshevik line had been his attendance — which included meetings with Lenin — at the Second Comintern Congress in the summer of 1920.

The Dreadnought ended 1921 — literally on New Year’s Eve — with a long attack on Gallacher. In Moscow the previous year, he had been confronted with Lenin’s “Left-Wing” Communism: An Infantile Disorder, which quoted him disapprovingly. “Undaunted,” he had stuck to his anti-parliamentary views and had joined Pankhurst in speaking at the Third International conference on behalf of the Left — opposing Labour Party affiliation and parliamentary action. At the same time, “honestly impressed with Lenin’s appeal for Communist unity,” he had returned determined to secure it. Participation in the united party, however, seemed “completely to have changed William Gallacher; a revolution has taken place in his mind.” Pankhurst quoted from “Are We Realists?” an article by Gallacher and J.R. Campbell that had appeared in the previous week’s Communist:

The class content of the Labour Party is proletarian. . . . To unconditionally repudiate affiliation to the Labour Party because of its defects leads to the most pitifully barren sectarianism. It brings one close to the position of the bewildered theoreticians of the “Three and a Half International,” whose immaculate Communist Parties and theoretically beautiful, but politically impotent industrial unions are no more a menace to Capitalism than the Primrose League.
On this, Pankhurst commented:

By the “Three and a Half International” the writers, of course, mean the Fourth. W. Gallacher and J.R. Campbell have indeed receded from their attitude of 1920 as some pages of *The Worker* will testify.

We prefer the Gallacher of 1920, who said he did not like the Parliamentary–Labour Party–Trade Union policy of Moscow, but would bow to it for the sake of unity as long as it remained the majority policy, and in the meantime would strive to change it for the “Left Wing” policy he now decries. Lenin advised us to form a Left Block with Gallacher in 1920. Where is Gallacher now?

(Oh, Comrade Lenin with your tortuous Eastern tactics, you are corrupting these simple Westerners, who do not understand you, and whose metal is softer than yours!)³²

*Soviet Democracy Deferred*

If such erstwhile ardent advocates of full-blooded soviet democracy were now preaching the necessity for obedience to the Third International and its leadership, this must have had a considerable influence on those on the Left, and not simply members of the CPGB, who had hitherto been enthused by the vision of a society in which the workers — real, literal workers — democratically took all decisions from the shop floor upwards. According to Zinoviev’s theses, the soviets were no longer to be seen as spontaneously created bodies exercising grassroots democracy but rather as a mechanism for bringing about the dictatorship of the proletariat, or Communist rule. They would be called into being when, and only when, the party determined that a revolutionary crisis was imminent.

In Russia, the ultra-optimistic prognosis of revolutionary advance was no longer tenable. The task of the Bolsheviks was to ensure that their rule survived in circumstances where, despite the end of the civil war, it was threatened, both internally and externally, from all sides. The first duty of British Communists was to do whatever they could to support their Russian comrades, besieged in a hostile world — a
duty that now took precedence over the promotion of the idea of soviet democracy. Indeed, “proletarian democracy” could now be equated with “democratic centralism.” Within the British Communist Party, democracy was to be abandoned “for the time being.” Given that the path to socialist revolution had already been well marked out in Russia, what scope was there for debate on policy?

Compared to the earlier post-1917 years, there was at this point little focus on the advocacy of soviet democracy and much more on the dictatorship of the proletariat, now clearly synonymous with the imposed rule of the “vanguard” Communist Party. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that, as far as “orthodox” Communism was concerned, the full implementation of soviet rule even in Russia itself — as those enthused in 1917 and 1918 by the prospect of this “higher” form of democracy would have understood it — had now been effectively postponed until some time in a hazy future, after the “dictatorship” had completely crushed all capitalist resistance.

In the case of Britain, it would be postponed until after disillusion with a future Labour government had rallied a working-class majority to the Communist cause. In July 1922, after the Labour Party had again refused to allow the CPGB to affiliate, The Communist still insisted on the necessity of a Labour government and “the determination of the Communist Party whether affiliated or not to assist them to gain that position.”

**Soviet Democracy Depoliticized**

Yet orthodox Communism did not entirely abandon soviet democracy, nor did it simply relegate it to a distant future. Rather, a way was found of reconciling a conception of soviet democracy with de facto dictatorship, whose “withering away” had now been deferred to a more distant day. Crucial to this was a well-established feature of the socialist movement, arguably its Achilles’ heel (or one of them): its distaste for, even rejection of, politics. Pankhurst’s anti-political stance has already been noted, in the previous chapter — though she was definitely not to share in the reconciliation with dictatorship. A
similar rejection of politics is present in the SLP’s idea of the replacement of the political state with the “Industrial Republic,” following the revolutionary takeover. Conventional “bourgeois” politics, with no real purchase on the actual distribution of power, seemed to be characterized by empty rhetoric, unscrupulous manipulation, and self-seeking egotism — all ineffectual hot air and deliberate deception. Moreover, political parties reflected socio-economic classes. But in the classless society that socialists were striving for, would not the divisions represented by these parties have disappeared?

There would have been few people active in the British socialist movement in the 1920s who had not at least a passing acquaintance with William Morris’s *News from Nowhere*. In the shortest chapter of that “utopian romance,” old Hammond, who guides the time-travelling Morris in the post-revolutionary future, famously dismisses politics completely: “We are very well off as to politics — because we have none.” Advocates of vanguard parties might have also found some apparent endorsement in another of Hammond’s statements. Asked whether “differences” are settled by the “will of the majority,” Hammond confirms that this is the case but adds: “The majority must have their way; unless the minority were to take up arms and show by force that they were the effective or real majority” (emphasis added). He goes on to say that this is unlikely to happen since “the apparent majority is the real majority.” 34 But that, of course, was in Morris’s ideal “communist” society of the future. How would it have been read by “British Bolsheviks” in the 1920s? Kevin Morgan has noted how frequently the memory of Morris and his notions of fellowship and the transformation of work were later invoked by visitors to the Soviet Union who were well disposed to what they encountered — or believed they encountered — there. 35

Part of the attraction of soviet democracy had always been that the debased distractions of “bourgeois democracy” would give way to the *real*, down-to-earth, practical concerns of workers. Based on this disdain for the degradations of “politics,” a version of soviet democracy was evolved that saw it as flourishing — and only able to
flourish — beneath a protective carapace provided by the Communist Party’s authoritarian rule, which warded off both the dastardly attacks of the worldwide capitalist conspiracy and the equally vicious machinations of the enemy within.

This version of soviet democracy can already be detected in the articles by Philips Price in the *Dreadnought* in 1919, quoted earlier in the chapter. The “two great social institutions” of revolutionary Russia were, according to the *Manchester Guardian* correspondent, “the political soviet and the economic soviet.” The former’s duty was “to protect the Republic from internal and external counter-revolution,” while the latter was to “to build up under the protection of the former the new social order once the danger of foreign intervention is removed.” It was then possible that “the political soviet will reduce its functions, and that the power in the land will pass to huge economic syndicates working under the Central Council of Public Economy.”

This was a novel interpretation of the soviet structure. Earlier accounts of soviet democracy had not distinguished separate “political” and “economic” soviets.

This emerging version is even more clearly visible in the constitution adopted by the Workers’ Committee movement early in 1921. The previous year there had been no mention of the dictatorship of the proletariat in Murphy’s report (in *Solidarity*) prior to the movement’s national conference, though soviet democracy had figured prominently: “We fail to see how workers can control industry without the Workers’ Committees or Councils.” The conference report the following month noted the declaration of solidarity with the “Russian Soviet Government” and the decision to affiliate to the Third International but also the movement’s commitment to “the Soviet form of organisation for the purpose of independently taking control of the industrial and social machinery.”

Then, in 1921, a new element entered the formulation of the movement’s “Objective,” which was now declared to be the overthrow of capitalism and “the setting up of a Workers’ Dictatorship *under the protection of which* a system of workers’ control and management shall...
be developed” (emphasis added).38 This followed a national shop stewards’ conference the previous month that, as Ralph Darlington puts it, “ratified this alliance with the CPGB by accepting a constitution which subordinated it to the political control of the party.”39

Yet the reality of soviet democracy in Russia was still insisted upon. In 1922, *The Communist* serialized Trotsky’s “Between White and Red.” In the chapter titled “About Democracy and the Soviets,” he rejected claims — attributed to the Mensheviks — about the “decay” of the soviets:

> As mass representative institutions the Soviets could not, of course, maintain that high tension which characterized them during the first period of internal struggle or at moments of acute danger from outside. It would take the dullest professor of constitutional law or the most brazen renegade of Socialism, to deny the fact that the Russian toiling masses right now, even amidst so-called “decay” of the soviet system, participate in directing all aspects of social life in a manner which is a hundred times more active, more direct, continuous and decisive than is the case in any parliamentary republic.40

Trotsky’s phrase “all aspects of social life” is worth noting. It already suggests a kind of “soviet democracy” from which “politics” was implicitly excluded.

> It is this notion of a “depoliticized” version of soviet democracy, able to operate — and indeed in Russia actually flourishing — beneath the dictatorship that protected it, that explains some otherwise baffling positions taken by Communists, and by other sympathizers with the USSR, in subsequent years. How else could one still assert the reality of soviet democracy against the undeniable — and frequently undeniable — evidence of dictatorship?

The myth of soviet democracy in this strange form persisted until long after the advent of Stalin. As late as 1937, Gollancz would publish Pat Sloan’s *Soviet Democracy*, which, as its title suggests, treated the myth as a contemporary reality. Sloan began his book with the claim that “well-known people of different political views make
statements which suggest that, in the Soviet Union of today, there exists a system of government which possesses all the essential features of democracy.” Chief among such “well-known” people were Beatrice and Sidney Webb, from whose Soviet Communism Sloan quoted to the effect that, unlike all previous societies, the USSR did not “consist of a Government and people confronting each other” but was rather “a Government instrumented by all the adult inhabitants.” 41 Sloan complained of the inclination “to treat democracy and dictatorship as two mutually exclusive terms, when in fact they may often represent two aspects of the same system of government.” The Soviet state had always had features of both. “But,” he insisted, “the democracy was enjoyed by the vast majority of the population, and the dictatorship was over a small minority.” 42

Lenin had realized that “the party, as the organised leadership of the mass of the people, must not be disbanded after the seizure of power, but, on the contrary, must be strengthened, in order to ensure that the real democracy achieved should not be overthrown by the armed forces of the property-owners.” 43 Protected by the dictatorship of the party, Sloan saw an essentially apolitical “real democracy” flourishing both in social institutions such as schools, trade unions and co-operatives and in the soviets themselves. As we have seen, from the early 1920s the CPGB was well on the way to this view.

Democracy is, of course, a highly complex issue, and yet, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, the proponents of all varieties of soviet democracy presented the choice as being simply between bourgeois and working-class democracy. One of the clearest expositions of the latter is, again, in Sloan’s Soviet Democracy:

The structure of democratic working-class organisations is almost always on the same general lines. Members join branches which elect local committees. On territories which cover a number of branches, either delegate committees, or conferences which elect a co-ordinating committee, are the supreme authority. And nationally, the supreme authority is usually a congress, with a committee elected at the congress.
taking its place as the supreme authority between congresses. This form of working-class organisation is universal because it is the most satisfactory form for working-class purposes. By means of delegate congresses the supreme authority widely represents the rank and file of the members, who give their delegates instructions. By means of a small executive committee elected at the congress the number of permanent officers is reduced to a minimum, so that most of the delegates can return to their regular jobs in their localities. Such a system will be more or less satisfactory according as the delegates really represent those who elect them. The Soviets from their very origin, made all members of the Soviet subject to recall if they ceased to give their electors satisfaction. In this way the Soviets were more democratic than many democratic organisations of the working people in other countries even at the present time.

Later in the book, explaining the absence of opposition parties in the USSR, Sloan stated that “a ‘party system’ became out of place in the Soviet State, just as a ‘party system’ is quite out of place in a working-class organisation in any capitalist country.” Curiously, what seems to have been largely unexamined and unquestioned, both by supporters and by opponents of soviet democracy, is precisely the role — if any — of political parties in “working-class democracy.” Soviet election results were, from the very beginning, routinely reported by all the socialist papers in terms of votes cast for, and delegates elected from, political parties. For example, reporting on the Petrograd Soviet elections in July 1918, The Call summarized the results as the election of “221 Bolsheviks, 12 Left Social Revolutionaries and only five anti-Soviet candidates.” (How someone elected to a soviet could be “anti-Soviet” was not explained.)

But if claims for the superiority of working-class democracy — epitomized by the soviets — over the bourgeois variety rested on the idea that instructions were given to delegates by their electors at the lowest level of the pyramid of branches and councils, how could the operation of such a system be represented in terms of the gains registered
by different political parties? Were not political parties — or at least parties standing for election — a feature of bourgeois, parliamentary-style, representative democracy? Were they not totally out of place in proletarian, soviet, delegate democracy? In a properly operating system of delegate democracy there might be a role for parties to put forward proposals at the base level. Beyond that, however, if claims to genuine grassroots democracy were to be realized, then it was the duty of those elected, whatever their personal predilections or political affiliations, to faithfully represent the decisions arrived at by the majority of their electors — or, if they felt unable to support the policies so decided, to seek replacement as delegates.

Anyone who had first-hand experience with delegate democracy, in trade unions or other such organizations, would surely have been aware of how difficult it is to operate such a system in practice. Even when delegates made a real effort to respect the mandates they were given, such structures tended towards what could be called an “activists’ democracy.” In an essentially voluntary organization such as a trade union, however, the tendency for relatively more militant members to push the organization too far in a direction not favoured by less active members was restrained in a variety of ways. There was usually some provision for special conferences, requisitioned by a certain minimum number of members, or for controversial issues to be put to a referendum vote. And it was usually possible for those totally at variance with the organization simply to leave it, or even to start a rival group. But an all-encompassing state structure based on soviet delegates was a very different proposition — especially with the monopoly of real power being exercised by a “vanguard party.”

Such considerations seem to not to have occurred to supporters of soviet democracy, although it is difficult to resist the suspicion that the fact that complex delegate systems tended to privilege those who had the commitment and stamina to become activists was one of the unacknowledged attractions of soviet democracy. But “council communists” such as Pankhurst and her comrades, with their sometimes naïve faith in “bottom-up” structures, could at least see that any kind
of democracy was incompatible with the dictatorship of the Communist Party leadership and the suppression of dissent.

In contrast, for orthodox Communists, once the dictatorship of the proletariat had come to be understood in terms of party rather than class, the only available interpretation of soviet democracy was the depoliticized one, in which democracy operated beneath the protective wing of party rule. Seen in this light, the Communist Party was not a political party at all in the normal sense but was simply the authentic voice of the working class, charged with the task of safeguarding soviet democracy from internal and external subversion. This position had begun to crystallize in Britain by the early 1920s, but it was to become even clearer in the 1930s. In his 1937 apologia for Stalin’s regime, Pat Sloan saw nothing contradictory in his statement, quoted earlier, that there was no place for a “party system” in the working-class movement and his endorsement of the Communist Party’s dictatorship in Russia. When the Communist Party succeeded in Britain, it “would have established itself not as a parliamentary party of the old type, but as the organised leadership of the people.”

But by then committed Communists were not the only ones to buy into the idea of soviet democracy without politics. The popularity, during the late 1930s and the 1940s in the wider Labour movement and beyond, of the Webbs’ Soviet Communism demonstrates this. Morgan pinpoints the “aversion to politics and woolly mindedness about the state” that underlay the Webbs’ “multiform conception of democracy.” He concludes that the Webbs did not regard the Soviet Communist Party as a political party at all but instead saw it as a “companionship,” an “order,” a “united confraternity” merely “termed the Communist Party,” rather like George Young’s comparison of the party to a “Religious order” that had so enthused Dora Montefiore around the time of the CPGB’s foundation. C.B. Macpherson’s belief, in the 1960s, that the Soviet Union was democratic in “the broader sense” seems to be a late and partial echo of this notion.

So, odd though it may seem in the early twenty-first century, it was possible to combine, in this fashion, a rejection of politics, the
belief that a socialist society would be naturally harmonious (an “epoch of rest” in Morris’s words), the assumption that the working class had a uniformly common interest, and the faith that the Communist Party represented this interest with what Morgan aptly calls “the old socialist dream of unmediated self-government.” The result was a novel vision of “actually existing” soviet democracy.