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ENDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Kronstadt and the “Collapse” of Communism

Writing in *Labour Leader* in March 1921, Bertrand Russell observed that a “Third Revolution” was in prospect in Russia. He based this view on reports by *Observer* and *Manchester Guardian* correspondent Michael Farbman, who noted “the determination of the masses, demonstrated by numerous meetings of rank and file Communists and non-partisans, to take a real share in the affairs of the State, and real power to the soviets, and to stamp out all the privileges and inequalities introduced by the Communist bureaucracy.” Russell concluded: “Whether the watchword will be ‘Constituent Assembly’ so popular among Russian émigrées [*sic*], or the more Russian ‘All Power to the Soviets’ the near future will show.”¹

Russell was a little late. The “Third Revolution” had already come — and failed. The previous week, in the same paper’s “International Notes,” Emile Burns had reported that “anti-Bolshevik forces outside

Russia” had succeeded in “stirring up a revolt against Soviet Russia.” The revolt was centred on Kronstadt, where a tsarist officer, General Koslovsky, was said by Moscow to be “directing the movement, which has been inspired by Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries and the French Bourgeoisie.” The same week, *The Communist* presented the “Revolution” at Kronstadt as “the French war-plot against Russia.”²

In fact, the experience of Kronstadt from 1917 onwards is probably the best evidence available for anyone wishing to argue that soviet democracy was far from mythical, as the title of this book suggests. Kronstadt was a naval base with a revolutionary tradition stretching back to 1905; its sailors had been regarded as “a loyal stronghold of the Soviet regime and its Communist party.”³ It enjoyed, says Israel Getzler, “virtual autonomy” and relatively privileged treatment at the hands of the Soviet regime. Until June 1918, its governing soviet remained essentially a broad socialist coalition. “Red Kronstadt” was a stronghold not of supporters of the Constituent Assembly but of those who fully accepted the superiority of soviet democracy. According to Getzler, “Kronstadt’s democracy was self-consciously egalitarian, but its body politic was confined to the mass of producers and ‘toilers,’ and excluded members of the propertied classes.”⁴ That its revolt in March 1921 (which was triggered by reports of serious unrest in Petrograd) was the Third Revolution that Russell was anticipating is evident from the rebellion’s slogan, “All Power to the Soviets and Not to Parties.” The revolt was ruthlessly suppressed and followed by “hundreds of executions.”⁵ Later it would become an icon for anarchist and far-Left critics of the Bolsheviks, and one might anticipate that it would have been a rallying point for the British “ultra-Left” at the time. But that was not so. Hostility from the pro-Bolshevik Emile Burns in *Labour Leader* was predictable, though it is a little strange that he was left unchallenged in the ILP paper. But what of those critics of orthodox Communism on the Left?

Even the SLP’s paper was hostile to the Kronstadters, with *The Socialist* concluding that “the whole matter is to all appearances one of wire-pulling in the interests of reaction and against the proposed

establishment of trade relations between this country and Russia.”⁶ *Solidarity*, which was to disappear that May, made no mention of the Kronstadt revolt in its “International Notes.” It may also be indicative of the response to Kronstadt at the time — even on the libertarian Left — that “Kronstadt” does not appear in the index of Shipway’s *Anti-Parliamentary Communism*.

Later, at the beginning of June, *The Socialist* re-published an article by Karl Radek titled “The International Lesson of Kronstadt.” The uprising, he said, had elicited a “great shout of joy from counter-revolutionaries.” Radek mocked “the leaders of the rebellion, who having proudly declared that they were ready to lay down their lives under the walls of Kronstadt, preferred to retire to Finland.” The Kronstadt sailors were “imbued with a peculiar sense of their own importance” and “surrounded by a halo of their revolutionary past.” Nevertheless, Radek conceded that the current situation fell short of the ideal of soviet democracy: “The Soviets . . . should exercise power. They should represent the masses as a whole, and not the Communist Party alone — We must create a **real Soviet power**.” It was necessary to rid the Communist Party of “careerists and place seekers.”

Moreover, not all the rebels had been reactionaries: “A section of the workers of Kronstadt were attracted to the movement by syndicalist tendencies.” The article was concluded the following week, with Radek urging that “the defeat of the Communist Party of Russia will destroy the only power which enables Soviet Russia to be a great world factor for revolution, and without the Communist Party, Soviet Russia will fall victim to counter-revolution.”⁷ But apart from Radek’s piece, *The Socialist* had nothing to say about Kronstadt — aside from a brief mention of the “Opening of Cronstadt Harbour” in its “International Notes” section early in July.⁸

The *Workers’ Dreadnought* was also slow to comment on Kronstadt. In April 1921, in an article headlined “End of Martial Law in Petrograd,” the paper took note of the “ending of the Kronstadt adventure.” According to its report, only the “conspirators” who had not made good their escape featured in the trial of the mutineers. Everything had been

“forgiven and forgotten for their misled supporters.”⁹ We should perhaps recall that the *Dreadnought*’s editor — or “Prisoner 9587,” as the same issue referred to her — was in jail and her organization had just merged itself in the “united” CPGB. As we saw in chapter 11, the paper made reference in October 1921 to “the insurrection of Kronstadt,” and the *Dreadnought*’s view of Kronstadt the following year would be very different from its initial reaction.

At the end of 1922, the *Dreadnought* reviewed *The Kronstadt Rebellion*, by the anarchist Alexander Berkman. Initially an enthusiastic supporter of the October Revolution, Berkman had acted as interpreter for George Lansbury during his visit the previous year and was in Petrograd at the time of the Kronstadt events.¹⁰ As a result of those events, Berkman decided to leave Russia. His book, said the *Dreadnought*, demonstrated that Kronstadt had not been

a White Guard insurrection, but an uprising of sailors, workers and peasants against Bolshevik bureaucracy, against the suppression of left propaganda and freedom generally and against the privileges and economic inequalities which have developed under the Bolshevik regime.

The twelve resolutions passed by the general meeting of the crews of the Baltic fleet, which formed the basis of the Kronstadt demands, were given in full.¹¹

But not all assessments of the significance of Kronstadt in the later *Dreadnought* were sympathetic. Early in 1924, in the course of a series of articles attributing the decline of the Russian Revolution largely to the peasants, that leading international proponent of Left Communism, Herman Gorter, gave a very hostile interpretation of the Kronstadt events. He saw it as the moment at which a peasantry inevitably and profoundly hostile to communism brought about the system’s downfall. The term “war communism,” to designate the economic system functioning during the Russian civil war, had only been used retrospectively, he insisted: it was not used at the time the system was operating.¹² Then came Kronstadt:

In February 1921, *the rising in the fortress of Kronstadt, on the battleships and in Petersburg* broke out. Then — as if by a breath — Communism collapsed. Its foundations disappeared in an instant. It may be argued that the rising was very insignificant considering the huge size of the country. Moreover, the peasants were not, and are not, organised as a class; but the small act of a small group of peasants was sufficient — it is said that the warships were mostly manned by peasant sailors.¹³

Whatever its view of the Kronstadt events, in the *Dreadnought's* eyes everything was heading inexorably downhill in Russia. The demise of the revolution was a regular theme in its final period, as we have already seen. In June 1923, a report headed “Russia Today” took up the entire front page. “A comrade returned from Russia speaks sadly of the situation there,” the *Dreadnought* told readers. With the New Economic Policy, capitalism was growing “like a snowball.” Little by way of propaganda for communism was in evidence, and what there was of it was mainly directed against the church. “The comrade knew little of the Workers’ Opposition,” the paper reported. “Its work can only be done underground, for all opposition is repressed.” In terms of everyday material conditions, Moscow appeared to be better off than before, although people in Warsaw had seemed better dressed. The comrade also noted that “at the Opera in Moscow one sees people even more richly clad than in London, but children selling programmes are in rags.” There were, moreover, “swarms of prostitutes and beggars.” Wages were often inadequate, while “bureaucratic delays and truculence” appeared to be growing.¹⁴

Lenin had been such an inspiration for Pankhurst in earlier years, but, reporting his serious illness in March 1923, she now saw him as “a courageous and able tactician in the struggle to overthrow Capitalism,” rather than an originator in the building of Communist ideology and practice. He lacked “the constructive conception of Communism and the practical ability to take definite measures thereto,” she concluded after Lenin’s death early the following year. “With the actual overthrow of capitalism, his social ideals became stationary, then receded

as his physical powers waned, and as the Soviet Government became stabilised in power.”¹⁵

But, in spite of this, Pankhurst still had *some* respect for Lenin. He was “one who fought wholeheartedly for principle, who burnt his bridges, who was not afraid to go forth alone, toiling without praise or encouragement till others should be converted to his views. Of such are the makers of history.”¹⁶

The Decline of Left-Wing Alternatives in Britain

In 1969, Walter Kendall’s *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain* caused controversy, centring as it did on the revelation of the importance of “Moscow gold” in setting up the CPGB — a revelation that has now become commonplace. As John McIlroy and Alan Campbell put it in their survey of interpretations of the Comintern-CPGB relationship: “Kendall’s conclusions on the important role Moscow gold played in the party’s formation have stood the test of time.” As they pointed out, the opening of the Russian archives had revealed, for example, that between 1920 and 1922 less than 3 percent of the CPGB’s income came from its members’ subscriptions.¹⁷ In an earlier article, McIlroy supplies a useful chart showing the annual allocations made by the Comintern to the CPGB from the time the party was founded through to 1929. And, as an article by Walter Kendall in the same issue of *Revolutionary History* demonstrates, it is certainly clear how much Russian funding contributed to the recruitment of intellectuals — students, teachers, writers, artists — during the period of the Popular Front in the following decade.¹⁸ There has been some debate about exactly how vital this financial support was, notably in relation to the work of Andrew Thorpe and, more recently, of Kevin Morgan.¹⁹ But there is no longer any real dispute about the huge significance of “Moscow gold.”

Of course, it has to be stressed that, for many on the Left at the time, there was nothing wrong with accepting such financial assistance, which was regarded as timely help from comrades abroad rather than as cash, with implicit strings attached, from a foreign government.

For example, when, in the issue of 10 September 1920, the *Daily Herald* asked its readers, “Shall We Take £75,000 of Russian Money?” it described the offer as “a magnificent demonstration of real working-class solidarity.” Many readers wrote in to urge acceptance, though the directors of the paper finally decided to refuse the offer a few days later. And as far as members of the CPGB are concerned, L.J. Macfarlane is surely right to say that “the ordinary party member did not see the relationship in terms of outside control and ‘Moscow gold.’ He saw himself as a member of a great working-class international movement guided by outstanding Marxist revolutionaries who were making Russia into a land of socialism.”²⁰

But the focus on “Moscow gold” has tended to obscure the other aspect of Kendall’s central thesis that, largely as a result of this Comintern support, the Communist Party “absorbed . . . practically the whole pre-existing revolutionary movement.” A Left that had once been “ultra democratic, opposed to leadership on principle, opposed to the professionalisation of the Labour movement almost as an article of faith” was replaced by one that was far more regimented and centrally directed by Comintern. The result, as he saw it, was the tragic decline of a variety of ideological alternatives: “the end of the SDF-BSP tradition, the demise of the SLP, the end of the shop steward movement and the burial of its ideas, the decline and disappearance of the movement for Guild Socialism, Syndicalism and workers’ control.”²¹ McIlroy and Campbell are of course right to say that there is no need to “accept Kendall’s conclusions as to the potential of the pre-CPGB revolutionary tradition” in order to give assent to his view of the decisive role played by the Comintern and the funding it supplied in the establishment and survival of the CPGB.²² But Kendall’s more positive evaluations of the pre-Leninist Left in Britain, which were subsequently sidelined, should not be ignored.

“Moscow gold,” or the lack of its availability to other Left organizations once the CPGB was securely established, certainly played a role in this narrowing of alternatives, but the crucial issue here is as much the disappearance of these alternatives as its cause. All these

pre-Bolshevik tendencies, and indeed the “Left Communism” of Pankhurst and her comrades, had in common a commitment to *some* form of robust and “strong” democracy, be it some version of “soviet democracy” or radical alternatives to both it and the status quo. The ideas may have been naïvely unrealistic, as well as seriously flawed, but the commitment and aspirations were real, even if they were not always fully reflected in practice.

Yet, as the defections to orthodox Communism of the Murphys, Gallachers, former guild socialists, and so many others on the Left shows, these alternative socialist “traditions” could be terribly fragile in the face of what decades later would be called “actually existing socialism.” The organizations embodying these alternative versions of socialism were for the most part very small. The ability to keep the group’s official organ afloat was absolutely crucial. Without it, that group and its distinctive ideas would almost certainly disappear from view as far as the wider Left was concerned. Within a few years of the establishment of the CPGB, the most prominent papers of organizations that stood to the left of the Labour Party and were independent of the Communist Party had all folded. And, as these papers vanished, alternative interpretations of soviet democracy or similar “industrially based” versions of the socialist commonwealth, as well as the earlier SDF version of radical democracy, were marginalized.

The Demise of Solidarity and The Guild Socialist

“Sudden Death” announced the final editorial in *Solidarity*, the paper of the shop stewards’ movement, on 13 May 1921. It explained that the movement’s National Administrative Council, now firmly under Communist Party control, had decided to “concentrate all their resource[s]” on the Scottish-based paper *The Worker*. Just how suddenly the death of *Solidarity* came about is illustrated by the fact that that week’s instalment of the serialization of William Mellor’s *Direct Action* ended with “(to be continued).” The acquisition of the rights to serialize the book had been proudly announced only the previous week. The editors hoped that a new publication, “The LIBERATOR,”

which would be “unhampered by any official or unofficial connection with any party or organisation,” would take the place of *Solidarity*. The editorial concluded with an appeal for “HARD CASH.” Clearly nothing like enough of this was forthcoming.²³

We have already seen how divisions over “soviet democracy” and the Bolsheviks wracked the guild socialist movement. Much later, G.D.H. Cole was to claim starkly that “it was the Communists who broke up the National Guilds League.”²⁴ This claim was not without substance, though it might be more accurate to say that it was the defection to the CPGB of so many of the most prominent and energetic Guildsmen — and Guildswomen — that sealed the fate of the NGL. As Kevin Morgan points out, most of the “leading personalities” recalled by Maurice Reckitt in 1941 in *As It Happened* had taken this path. There had been

the Coles themselves, Ivor Brown, William Mellor, Raymond Postgate, Monica Ewer, Norman Ewer, A.L. Bacharach, R. Page Arnot, Walter Holmes, Hugo Rathbone and Rose Cohen. All but the Coles and Brown joined the infant CPGB, five of them never to resign, and within the party they at first provided the core of a not dissimilar grouping known as the “nucleus.”²⁵

Some others were already pulling in different directions — A.R. Orage toward Social Credit, while Reckitt became a Distributist.²⁶ The collapse of the Building Guild in January 1923 was undoubtedly the “shattering blow” that W.H. Greenleaf calls it, but Kendall is surely right in arguing that the divisive influence of the CPGB played “a decisive role” in the movement’s demise. The final annual meeting of the NGL, in May 1923, was poorly attended, and those present empowered the executive to wind the organization up without a further conference.²⁷

But, well before this, advocates of the guild approach were able to draw some comfort from the influence that guild socialism was beginning to have in the Labour Party and, especially, the ILP. Cole had noted in 1920 that the Labour Party conference agenda contained many motions on the control of industry. “Only one of these, from

Norwood Labour Party, definitely mentions the name Guild Socialism; but they are all virtually Guild resolutions,” he commented.²⁸ Yet two years later, when the ILP adopted what was widely seen as a form of guild socialism, Cole’s welcome was less than hearty. The new constitution, he thought, incorporated “as much Guild Socialism as can be put in without mortally offending the old stagers.” And he concluded: “Some commentators are suggesting that the I.L.P. has been converted to Guild Socialism. Perhaps; but I do not hear of any bonfires being ignited by the N.G.L.”²⁹

By that time, *The Guild Socialist* had just over a year to run. The final issue appeared in August 1923. As with *Solidarity* over two years earlier, a replacement, to be called *New Standards: A Journal of Workers’ Control*, was promised for October. This paper did in fact appear. It ran for a year, until an announcement appeared in October 1924: “This is the final issue.”³⁰

The End of The Socialist and the Sinking of the Workers’ Dreadnought

The SLP’s *The Socialist* had gone from monthly to weekly publication at the beginning of 1919, and its size increased from six to eight pages in April 1919. But such success was not to last. Though it claimed in August of 1921 to be “the largest Socialist paper in the country,” the same issue announced the need for “a slight curtailment,” for “purely technical reasons.” By December, the paper was urging readers to buy two copies of each issue to assist its “Circulation Push.”³¹ Efforts continued into 1922, with pleas for help from the “Manager, S.L.P. Press.” Soon it was claimed that “sales are increasing continuously week by week,” but by June readers were being asked to collect “bundle orders” from railway stations to cut postage costs.³² That August, the Glasgow branch was given a prize for selling more copies of *The Socialist* than any other branch, but two months later heavy losses were reported, and it was announced that the paper was returning to monthly publication.³³

The Socialist managed to survive through 1922 and 1923. Its last issue, in February 1924, devoted its front page to the death of Lenin,

and rather appropriately reprinted an editorial by De Leon, from the *Daily People* of 15 April 1900, that ended: "The Political Government must go. The Industrial Government must come." But there was no hint that the paper might be closing down.

The other main organ of "independent Communism," and the final one to succumb, was the *Workers' Dreadnought*. Like *The Socialist*, it did so after a long and desperate struggle to survive. In October 1922, the price of the *Dreadnought* was halved to one penny and a rise of circulation was claimed. But by the following March more regular donations were deemed "vital to the continuation of the paper."³⁴ A "£500 Fund," intended to keep the paper going, had reportedly risen to £470 8s 9½d by 17 March 1923 and to £501 8s 9½d by 7 April. But it had taken fifteen months to raise this amount. Now a "£1,000 Fund" aimed to achieve its target by the end of the *Dreadnought's* tenth year, on 24 March 1924.

Other fundraising efforts in 1923 included a "Social and Dance" at the Circle Gaulois in Shaftesbury Avenue, at which a "SELECTED WEST END JAZZ BAND" was promised.³⁵ The weekend of 5 and 6 May featured a "Grand Carnival," with "Jazz Band, Streamers, Hats, Balloons," at the same venue, as well as a "Social" with jazz band and speakers in Whitechapel.³⁶ August saw a *Dreadnought* holiday reunion at Pankhurst's home, the Red Cottage, in Woodford, and by December the paper was offering: "Head reading by an expert phrenologist. Proceeds to 'Workers' Dreadnought.'"³⁷ In spite of the problems of keeping the paper afloat, Pankhurst launched a monthly literary and artistic journal called *Germinal*. A "Germinal Circle," meeting monthly, was formed, which claimed credit for the London exhibition of works by the Hungarian artist Emerich Gondor.³⁸

Notable features of the later years of the *Dreadnought* are the increased approval given to libertarian and/or anarchist enthusiasts for soviet democracy and the early attention given to the rise of fascism. To create a "vision of Communism" in the minds of the average person, no better books could be found, said the paper, than Kropotkin's *Conquest of Bread* and Morris's *News from Nowhere*.³⁹

Nothing if not an internationalist, Sylvia Pankhurst was especially aware of developments in Italy, no doubt in part because her partner, Silvio Corio, was an Italian political exile.⁴⁰ Pankhurst was particularly alarmed at the sympathetic reporting of fascism in the mainstream British press, including the *Manchester Guardian*, where a leading article “largely condoned the acts of the Fascisti in Italy, and seriously discussed the advisability of such a force.”⁴¹ Even more shocking was the socialist *Daily Herald*, which she accused of “unexampled treachery to the cause of the workers” in “attempting to whitewash the White Terror of the Fascisti” and soon after castigated for “joining in the general Press conspiracy to make this evil Mussolini appear a brave, and withal rather a splendid fellow, in spite of his faults.”⁴² Pankhurst was active in campaigning against every variety of fascism, warning of Hitler’s “storm troopers armed with hand-grenades in Bavaria” and “a society on Fascist lines called ‘The Integral Race’” in Spain.⁴³ She spoke frequently at anti-fascist meetings and attacked attempts to form a “British Fascisti Movement.”⁴⁴

By the end of 1923, advertisements had appeared that read: “Red Cottage, Woodford Wells. For Outings and Week-ends. Parties Catered For.”⁴⁵ The back page of the 24 March 1924 issue featured a large woodcut showing teas being enjoyed outside the Red Cottage, which was repeated the following week (5 April), with the announcement: “Teas provided Saturdays and Sundays from April 18 (Good Friday).” Meanwhile, as of the beginning of 1924 — at which point the £1,000 Fund had amassed only £169 12s 6½d — there was a noticeable deterioration in the quality of the paper’s layout, and by early February the paper was appealing for volunteers to do “Clerical and Organisational work.”⁴⁶ By May, the *Dreadnought* was claiming to be “the only weekly which maintains the idea of Pure Communism as a constructive vision.”⁴⁷

The final issue of the *Dreadnought* appeared on 16 June 1924. As with *The Socialist*, there was no warning given of its demise. Given her early awareness of threat posed by fascism, it is hardly surprising that the next paper Pankhurst launched, in 1936, was a broad anti-fascist weekly: *The New Times and Ethiopia News*. Although its primary

focus fell on opposing Mussolini's invasion and subjugation of Ethiopia, it highlighted every anti-fascist and anti-Nazi cause of the time.⁴⁸

Justice and the Ending of the SDF-BSP Tradition

To those younger socialists radicalized by the war and by the Russian Revolution, with its promise of soviet democracy, the party that had chosen to resume its old title, the Social-Democratic Federation, must have seemed an irrelevant anachronism. Hyndman had alienated the majority of BSP members by his pro-war stance, and the vehemently anti-Bolshevik line he subsequently pursued only deepened this alienation. His variety of radical democracy, with its emphasis on citizens as much as on workers (if not more so), had little appeal to those enthused by the democratic potential of the soviets or by the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Hyndman had died, at the age of seventy-nine, in November 1921. Many of the SDF's remaining members — or at least those who contributed regularly to *Justice* — were, like him, part of the “Old Guard of the S.D.F.”

Yet *Justice* survived longer than most left-wing alternatives to orthodox Bolshevism. It began 1925 with its masthead still proclaiming the paper to be “The Oldest Social-Democratic Journal in Great Britain.” Its New Year's resolution was to “keep ‘Justice’ and the S.D.F living.” But it was not to be. Three weeks later, H.W. Lee announced that, after forty-one years, the paper had to cease publication. It would be incorporated into the monthly *Social-Democrat*. In its final edition, *Justice* took a last swipe at the Bolsheviks, applauding Gandhi for administering “a wise and well-merited rebuke to those Bolsheviks who are seeking to use him for their hopeless Indian projects.” Gandhi — rightly, the paper said — did not believe in “short, violent cuts to success.”⁴⁹

This was not quite the end of the SDF, however. The weekly paper was gone, but the party survived in an attenuated form for the remainder of the interwar period. The final chapter (written by E. Archbold) of *Social-Democracy in Britain* (1935) is entitled “Conclusion: The S.D.F. Vindicated.” In it, Archbold argued that “the Labour Party has virtually become a Social-Democratic Party itself.”⁵⁰ It must

have seemed very ironic to those who could recall the pre-war socialist movement that the SDF was now contrasted with the ILP, which had gone “out of the ranks of the Labour Party, and into the political wilderness.”⁵¹ Only one comment in Archbold’s account seems to recognize the distinctively radical notions of democracy and socialism that had always characterized the Social-Democrats: “The tendency of the Labour Party to apply the public corporation idea as a means of securing the transition to public ownership has not been received without some trepidation amongst the S.D.F. membership.” Public corporations were not what the Social-Democrats had in mind when, at the previous year’s conference, they passed a resolution calling for “the public ownership and democratic control of the instruments of production and distribution.”⁵²

*The Beginning of the End of Labour Leader:
Snowden Versus Mrs. Glasier*

If the end of *Justice*, *The Guild Socialist*, *Solidarity*, *The Socialist*, and the *Workers’ Dreadnought* marked the effective end of the organizations whose outlook they embodied and for which they were the main point of contact with the wider socialist world, the case of *Labour Leader* was different. The *paper* came to an end, but the ILP itself was to remain through all the twists and turns of the interwar period — and, in a much diminished form, beyond. But the fate of the *Leader* well illustrates the divisive effect that Bolshevism’s claim to be promoting soviet democracy could have, even in a case where neither of the main participants were likely ever to become “British Bolsheviks.”

We have seen how — surprisingly — Philip Snowden’s *initial* attitude to the Bolshevik seizure of power and to the claims of soviet democracy was equivocal and fell far short of the outright condemnation that might have been anticipated. This had much to do with his hope, during the final year of the First World War, that the Bolsheviks would be instrumental in bringing about a swift and “democratic” peace. The relative optimism of Snowden and of other prominent ILPers continued into the early post-war months. Even Ramsay MacDonald

still had a sympathetic take on what was happening in Russia. In the summer of 1919, he was critical of the Allies' interventionary activities rather than of the Bolsheviks. As we saw earlier, while invoking the "Jacobinism" he believed inevitable in revolutions, he blamed the Allies' hostility for prolonging it and equated Lenin with Rousseau as an inspiration for the future.⁵³

We have seen how enthusiasm for the idea that the ILP should join the Third International initially went far beyond the ranks of those who were later to leave and join the CPGB. It included Clifford Allen, who was on his way to becoming the ILP's leading figure in the early 1920s. With the "Left-Wing of the I.L.P" campaign well underway, however, attitudes were soon to harden. By the spring of 1920, Snowden was criticizing Lansbury's approving views of the Bolsheviks, and his antipathy became deeper and more bitter after Ethel Snowden's visit to Russia as part of the Labour Party-TUC delegation and the treatment she was subjected to on her return, when she came out as unequivocally hostile to the Bolsheviks.

Snowden still blamed the interventionists, but he now pulled no punches in the way he described the Bolsheviks. At the end of 1920, he insisted that

Winston Churchill has done more than any living man to strengthen the Bolshevik Government. If it had not been for his policy the Russian people would themselves long ago have dealt with the gang of despots who usurped power by force and maintain it by tyranny aided by the help of British and French Bolsheviks like Churchill and Poincaré [*sic*]. The best way to kill Bolshevism is to give the Russian people goods. Even if some of the men in power remain their methods will not survive the opening up of intercourse with the rest of the world.

This was followed on the page he was still contributing to *Labour Leader* by "An Appeal to British Labour" from "a number of well-known Russian Socialists living in England." It was right to denounce the blockade and demand recognition of the Soviet government, but the Labour Party was silent about "the suppression of liberty and every

form of democracy by that Government.” Snowden urged that socialists should “make it a condition of moral support that the Bolsheviks should show at least as much consideration for Russian Socialists as for American capitalist concessionaires.” This was too much for Katharine Bruce Glasier, the paper’s editor, who appended a long editorial note: “The Editor feels compelled to disassociate herself once and for all from Mr Snowden’s bitter denunciations of the Bolshevik leaders.” She had, she said, no sympathy with their “crude materialism” or their “absurd attempts to interfere with the free self-government of the Socialist movements in other countries,” but she believed them to be “sincere” and “ready to die for the cause.”⁵⁴

The reason for Glasier’s negative reaction to Snowden’s anti-Bolshevik comments is clear from her letter to him, quoted by Laurence Thompson. Her concern was to avoid publishing “anything that could be used by the Government to help them make war on Soviet Russia or weaken International Labour’s Resistance to that War.”⁵⁵ Undeterred, Snowden returned to the attack the following week, applauding the Labour Party’s refusal to allow the CPGB to affiliate:

Any other decision would have been an act of suicide. A great deal of harm has been done already to the Labour and Socialist movement in this country by its uncritical support of Bolshevism and by its support and toleration of Communist speakers. The Communists stand for the dictatorship of a minority, which has seized power by force.⁵⁶

But while that week’s *Leader* included a letter from Walter Ayles, a member of the executive of the NAC, in support of Snowden, Glasier reported that she had received “a number of warm-hearted letters thanking her for her editorial protest.” A week later, she claimed to have received “a veritable summer shower of kindly letters and resolutions” supporting her position “and usually asserting it represents the general feeling of the I.L.P. membership.” She had decided to print only one, from Clement J. Bundock, a member of the NAC — but not of its executive, which had criticized her.

Bundock defended Glasier’s rights as editor and maintained that

“the editorial footnote more accurately expressed the attitude of the majority of members of the I.L.P.” He was concerned lest “these unsparing comments upon the Bolsheviks were to be regarded by our comrades on the Continent as the opinion of the I.L.P.” He admired Snowden’s work but believed that “we cannot endorse such phrases as ‘gang of despots’ and the general tone of the paragraphs in question.”⁵⁷

Meanwhile, the ILP executive deeply regretted “the Editor’s comments at the foot of Mr. Snowden’s Notes.” It noted that “Mr Snowden was appointed by the N.A.C. as the writer responsible for the Editorials and the Notes on Current Affairs and any such criticism affecting policy should have been made first to the N.A.C.” The editor’s reply was “implied in her last week’s note, which was only the culmination of a series of differences between herself and Mr Philip Snowden on the special matter at issue.” The NAC met only once a quarter, and only at that point could it make the party’s position clear. “The harm done to the movement by an unquestioned statement in the ‘Labour Leader’ is immediate,” she declared.⁵⁸

A special meeting of the NAC on 16 and 17 December 1920 tried to calm things by confirming the editor’s full discretion and responsibility for the paper’s contents, while accepting that Snowden should be responsible only to the NAC for his signed articles.⁵⁹ But he had had enough. On 6 January 1921, he announced: “With the writing of this paragraph my contributions to *Labour Leader* cease.” His was not the only exit. The following week, readers learned that the editor had asked for “a release from her duties” as of Easter, “which will enable her to come out once again, with, she hopes a veritable host of other willing propagandists, to the market places and village greens.”⁶⁰

In her last weeks as editor, Glasier found herself refusing to print more letters, including one from C.H. Norman, in which he chided the “Vienna Union” for accepting Martov as the Russian representative on its executive committee, describing him as “an ex-ally of Koltchak, and Denikin.” A fortnight later came an announcement that “Mrs Bruce Glasier has had a rather serious nervous breakdown and has been ordered complete rest by her medical adviser.” Tom Johnson, the editor

of *Forward*, would take over for the time being. Then, early in July, it was announced that, starting in August, Bertram R. Carter would become the editor of the paper.⁶¹

The former editor, whose husband, a leading member of the ILP for decades, had died the previous summer, seems to have recovered quite quickly from her illness. By mid-June, she was reported addressing large meetings in Middlesborough.⁶² She was appointed as a “special propagandist” and spent much of following eighteen years on the road for the ILP and the Labour Party. She died in 1950, at the age of eighty-three.⁶³ It is difficult not to feel some sympathy for an editor besieged from all sides.

The conflict was a defining moment for Snowden as well. He refused to accept renomination as ILP treasurer and, although he remained a member until 1927, played little or no part in the party’s affairs after early 1921. As with the related issue of the treatment of Ethel, he seems to have taken the “unseemly wrangle” with Glasier very personally.⁶⁴ In his autobiography, Snowden refers to her as the “Acting-Editor” — but never by name. The chapter following his account of the “wrangle” celebrates the lives and contributions to the socialist cause of W.C. Anderson and J. Bruce Glasier. But whereas he devotes two paragraphs to William Anderson’s wife, Mary Macarthur, there is no hint that Bruce Glasier was married to a woman so prominent in the ILP.

The End of Labour Leader

The impetus behind the replacement of *Labour Leader* with the *New Leader* in 1922 came from the new treasurer, Clifford Allen, later described by Fenner Brockway as “in effect the directing head of the Party.”⁶⁵ According to Arthur Marwick, the NAC voted to transfer publication from Manchester to London, with three dissenters, “probably R.C. Wallhead, Ben Riley, and Fred Jowett, who represented the core of the old-stagers’ resistance to Allen’s innovations.”⁶⁶ In David Marquand’s words, Allen “forced through a radical transformation of the worthy but unreadable *Labour Leader*, which was rechristened the *New Leader* and put under the editorship of the well-known socialist

journalist, H.N. Brailsford.”⁶⁷ Readability is subjective. By no means all ILPers found the old paper “unreadable” or the new one worth reading. As Marwick says: “Unhappily . . . the Party membership did not take too kindly to the new paper.”⁶⁸

As a competitor of *The Nation*, the *New Statesman*, and *The Spectator*, Brailsford’s enterprise was a success. Its circulation rose to 47,000. Brockway, who took over as editor after Brailsford’s resignation in October 1926 (after the “Allen régime” had given way to that of Maxton’s a year earlier), agreed that “Brailsford produced a paper of great literary merit, loved by school teachers for its Nature Notes, adored by artists for its woodcuts, and revered by intellectuals for its theoretical features.”⁶⁹ Robert Dowse notes in *Left in the Centre* that “particularly justified” among the complaints from members were those against “intellectualism” — and, more specifically, the “‘arty’ intellectualism that plagued the I.L.P.”⁷⁰

For those who see the episode as a shift from a plebeian to a comfortable bourgeois ambiance, the fact that Brailsford began with an annual salary of £1,000, in contrast to Katharine Bruce Glasier’s £2 17s (rising to £3 5s) a week, was probably conclusive. “I.L.P. salaries were high under the Allen regime,” notes Brockway.⁷¹ Pankhurst was predictably scornful: “We wonder how he is able to put aside the thought that of the thousands of copies of the paper which might be freely distributed each week for the difference between the £2 or £3 a week on which he could live if he chose, and the £20 a week he actually draws.”⁷² There were many in the ILP who would have sympathized with Pankhurst’s view. Indeed, the editor’s salary was criticized by a Sheffield delegate at the 1923 annual conference as being contrary to the traditions of the ILP and extravagant at a time of mass unemployment.⁷³

Dowse points out the gravity of the ILP’s finances in general and those of the *Labour Leader* in particular. Its annual losses were estimated at £1,200, and its circulation had fallen to below 20,000.⁷⁴ This was a crucial factor in the paper’s transformation, but there seems little doubt that Allen’s project was greatly aided by the almost simultaneous

resignations of Snowden and Glasier the previous year. The prolonged battle over Third International affiliation not only made the wider debate on the nature of Bolshevik Russia critically important but also increased its bitterness. One casualty was *Labour Leader* itself. But the “literary” *New Leader* would not last very long. In retrospect, it is difficult not to see this episode as, in part, a sort of attempted cooling-off period in the disputes over the correct response to the Bolshevik revolution and its “soviet democracy” that had riven the ILP during the previous several years.

Attitudes Towards Leadership and the Cult of Lenin

As we have seen, Kendall argued that, in view of the Comintern’s “elevation of leadership to a cardinal principle,” the advent of a British Communist Party largely funded from Moscow ultimately spelled the virtual end of a revolutionary Left “opposed to leadership on principle” and “opposed to the professionalisation of the Labour movement.”⁷⁵ In his study of J.T. Murphy, Ralph Darlington notes the severely anti-leadership attitudes of the embryonic shop stewards’ movement and the decision, taken at the founding conference of the national organization, that “the national committee should have purely *administrative* powers” leading to the election of “a National Administrative Council.”⁷⁶ What his account might obscure is the fact that such things were not some new phenomenon peculiar to the wartime shop stewards’ movement. In fact, they had antecedents in several parts of the modern socialist movement in Britain, from the time of its inception in the 1880s.

The “National Administrative Council” was precisely the name adopted for the ILP’s national body at its founding conference back in 1893. The suspicion of leadership in general — and also opposition to the beginnings of a “cult of personality” surrounding Keir Hardie — was reflected in the 1896 decision to dispense with the title “president” in favour of “chairman,” which did not prevent motions appearing for some years afterwards at the annual conference seeking the abolition of the office under *any* name. Opposition to leadership verged on the

obsessive in Blatchford's *Clarion*. It constituted much of the driving force behind the *Clarion* federation, or, to give it its proper title, the National and International General Federation of Trade and Labour Unions, in the late 1890s.⁷⁷

Anti-leadership and anti-hero-worship attitudes long predated this, and they could apply to the dead as well as the living. In the 1880s, the SDF paper *Justice* frequently railed against "Fabianistic caesarism,"⁷⁸ while the elaborate graveside ritual planned by the "Communitic Working Men's Club" to mark the first anniversary of Marx's death was seen as offensive. "Any renewal of the old pagan and Catholic forms of canonisation of individuals is contrary to the principles of socialism as we understand it," thundered *Justice*, adding that no one would have protested more vehemently against such an unwelcome development than Marx himself.⁷⁹ And on several subsequent occasions, Hyndman, in particular, inveighed against any tendency to "deify" Marx or to "regard his teachings as authoritative." No doubt this was motivated in part by Hyndman's desire not to be overshadowed himself by Marx — or by anyone else. Nonetheless, his protests reflect a very pronounced, indeed dominant, attitude in the SDF generally. At the same time, the fact that Hyndman criticized fellow Social-Democrats John E. Ellam and J.B. Askew for their "deification" of Marx indicates that there were tendencies in the opposite direction.⁸⁰

Hyndman, full of his own importance and sure of the correctness of his views on all subjects, is frequently seen as dominating the SDF and BSP, until the revolt against his pro-Ally position during the Great War. Yet he always objected to being referred to as the party's "leader." Indeed, on more than one occasion he was subject to party censure — something he accepted with bad grace, but accepted nonetheless.⁸¹

Ernest Belfort Bax is often regarded (despite his notorious anti-feminism) as the one serious Marxist theoretician in the SDF. John Charles Cowley describes him as "uncompromising in his adherence to revolutionary socialism," adding that "it was a Babouvist conception of revolution; the seizure of power by an elite — the working

class — vanguard.”⁸² But we also need to remember that Bax was so exercised by the dangers of control by a single individual that his essay “Democracy and the Word of Command” advocated that committees of three be substituted for ships’ captains and other analogous holders of authority.⁸³

It is certainly true that what was only just beginning to be referred to regularly as the “Left” of the pre-1914 British socialist movement was characterized by a suspicion of all forms of leadership and a desire to offset them with democratic checks. From this perspective, it was the Fabians on the “Right” of the movement, and, to a lesser extent, the “leaders” of the ILP and especially MacDonald, whose major defect seemed, to those situated to their left, to be a willingness to approve — even to celebrate — the leadership of elites both political and bureaucratic. It was again Bax who depicted Fabianism as “the special movement of the Government official just as militarism is the special movement of the soldier and clericalism of the priest.”⁸⁴ But just how far anti-leadership attitudes had penetrated into the Labour mainstream is shown by the fact that it was not until after the Great War that the Labour Party officially adopted the office of “Leader.”

This is the context in which the cult that grew up around the Bolsheviks, and Lenin in particular, needs to be understood. It was by no means confined to “Right-Wing” Communists, or to those who would become such in the eyes of Pankhurst and other self-designated “Lefts.” Indeed, one of the earliest and most extraordinary statements about the Bolshevik seizure of power was made by Pankhurst herself in a *Workers’ Dreadnought* editorial at the end of November 1917. Having praised the Bolsheviks for exceeding their promises as regards securing the land for the peasants and the factories for the workers and going ahead with preparations for the Constituent Assembly, she asked for appreciation of “the difficulties of those who are thus courageously attempting to put into practice the teachings of Christ.”⁸⁵

Perhaps the religious language is not so surprising in the light of the way that Lenin was awarded a species of secular sainthood. Other Bolshevik leaders, notably Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Bukharin, were

singled out for personal appreciation, and Trotsky's picture, captioned "Chief of the Victorious Red Army," appeared on the front page of the 6 November 1919 issue of *The Call*. But this was just a bit of mild hero worship compared to the adoration lavished on Lenin. Earlier that year, the *Workers' Dreadnought* described Lenin as "the recognised leader of the proletarian world."⁸⁶ A few months later, reviewing "Mr Ransome's Great Book" (*Six Weeks in Russia in 1919*) in *The Call*, Fred Willis highlighted the author's stress on Lenin's cheerful temperament and sense of humour and quoted approvingly Ransome's statement that "he is without personal ambition." Writing in *The Call* in November 1919, Robert Dell noted that "everybody who has met Lenin agrees that he is perhaps the greatest man of our time." He could be regarded as "the Robespierre of the Russian Revolution," except that "Lenin has not Robespierre's rigid dogmatism and narrow fanaticism." In the same issue, the paper spoke of "the wonderful foresight of the great revolutionary leader."⁸⁷ And by September 1920 the *Daily Herald* was describing Lenin as "a great man — a man whose power is drawn from selflessness, who has never let his interests count against his ideas."⁸⁸

A quantity of verse — of a type one might think many readers would find embarrassing — appeared in some of the left-wing papers. One example, from the 9 March 1918 edition of Pankhurst's *Dreadnought*, will suffice. "To Lenin," by "Ronald Campbell Macfie, M.A., M.B.C.M., LL. D.," began:

'Tis thine in places dark and desolate
 To fashion Beauty to illumine the night
 Of Falsehood and of Fear with Reason's light:
 'Tis thine from wrack of empires to create
 A commonwealth of Love, a Federal State,
 Not founded on deceit or gold or might
 But built by Truth and Justice in despite
 Of all the Powers of Moloch and of Hate.

But even this was mild stuff compared with "Lenin — A Birthday Sketch," which *The Call* published in April 1920. Although Lenin

was seen in hostile quarters as a fanatic, it explained, “this fanatic has always been, and still is, the most tolerant of men — except, indeed towards the enemies of the working class and those who themselves are tolerant of them.” The writer of the tribute continued: “Happy the country and the age which has produced such a man.” And Theodore Rothstein, writing as “W.A.A.M.,” concluded by apostrophizing the man himself: “Vladimire Illyitch, the proletariat of all countries greets you on your fiftieth birthday and cries out. Long live the proletarian revolution and its great leader.”⁸⁹

The devotion of the “great leader” was vividly illustrated a couple of months later, again in *The Call*, by Otto Grimlund’s “Personal Recollections of Lenin,” reprinted from the American socialist publication *The Truth*: “Long after the lights have been extinguished and only the clicking of the watch breaks the silence of the night, the light in Lenin’s workroom up in the castle of the Kremlin is still burning.”⁹⁰ And there was more along the same lines at the end of the year from Maxim Gorky, who declared: “The fundamental aim of Lenin’s whole life is the happiness of mankind.” Not that that was enough:

His private life is such that in an age of strong religious faith Lenin would have been regarded as a saint. . . . A severe realist, a politician of intellectual ability, Lenin is gradually becoming a legendary character. And that is well.⁹¹

This sort of thing was perhaps predictable in the pages of *The Call* and *The Communist*, and perhaps also in the *Daily Herald*, where Robert Williams’s characterization of Lenin as “simple, genial and entirely without affectation” seems restrained in comparison with some of the other encomiums. But some came from more unexpected quarters. “It is well known that Lenin himself,” said the *New Statesman*, “lives on the rations of a sedentary worker, which are substantially less than those of a manual worker.”⁹² Perhaps this was not so surprising. In his study of the early decades of the *Statesman*, Adrian Smith commented on the “sycophancy” of Clifford Sharp, the editor, toward Lenin and other leading Bolsheviks.⁹³

But not all of the *Statesman* pronouncements on Lenin at this time were sycophantic. In June 1920, the journal detected “a certain Napoleonic outlook” shared by Lenin and Churchill:

Both are professed democrats who at bottom have not the least respect for democracy: and both without a trace of personal brutality, act always on the assumption that human life is of very small account beside the realisation of their own aims and ideals. Both . . . are intellectual fishwives who believe in the real efficacy of reiterated abuse and are themselves past-masters of resourceful vituperation: and both in certain directions, are as invincibly ignorant as they are always clever and industrious.

Lenin had been given the chance to show “what a second-rate intellect combined with self-confidence and indomitable courage and persistence can achieve,” but his letter to the British proletariat seemed to have produced “a most salutary revulsion of feeling in all sorts of quarters.” Anti-Bolsheviks, the *Statesman* concluded, would be wise to confiscate Mr Churchill’s sword — and it would be wiser still for pro-Bolsheviks to confiscate Lenin’s pen.⁹⁴

New Statesman writers might waver between enthusiasm and skepticism as far as the Bolshevik leader was concerned, but “Affable Hawk,” who contributed the paper’s “Books in General” feature, remarked on his cult status in March 1921:

Early every day during the past month I have passed a church outside which stands the announcement in red letters

“LENIN? or THE LORD?”

It invites us to attend six Lenten sermons. My first feeling was “Lenin and the Lord” this is really fame! My second was that perhaps even Lenin was being given rather undue prominence.⁹⁵

There was, in short, an unmistakable shift from previous anti-leadership attitudes to cultlike celebrations of Lenin and, for the infant Communist Party, a stress on the role of the vanguard party and the adoption of “democratic centralism,” which had the effect of elevating

the position of the party's leaders. But if that much is clear, the question of professionalization is trickier. Men, and less often women, had taken paid roles — very low paid, usually — in British socialist organizations long before the arrival of the CPGB in 1920. And, of course, paid officials were commonplace in the trade unions. In fact, finding such work was often an economic necessity for those whose political and/or industrial militancy had resulted in dismissal and blacklisting by employers. During the war and post-war years, arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment were all too common consequences of any kind of radical socialist activity.

Working for the new Communist Party was no gateway to fame and fortune — especially not the latter. But the degree of professionalization did increase with the “Bolshevization” of the party. The policy of democratic centralism led in this direction, and so, especially, did the attempt, in the words of *The Communist*, to create a “centralized organisation of the revolutionary forces.”⁹⁶ One could say that “Moscow gold” put Communist Party employees — as long as they took care to toe the notoriously swiftly changing party line — in something like the position of someone with a rich uncle. He might not think much of you, but, in the last analysis, he could be relied on to come to your rescue when total disaster threatened.⁹⁷

But even before the Bolshevization of the British Communist Party was well underway, *some* had detected what they saw as signs of an incipient creation of an alternative officialdom. This was particularly true of some of the CPGB's critics in the SLP. At the time of the January 1921 Unity Conference in Leeds, an SLP'er from Leicester, who signed himself “F.L.R.,” described, with more good humour than was often found in *The Socialist*, how he had gone to the Victoria Hotel — probably, he said, the largest hotel in Leeds — in hopes of being able to report the proceedings. “A London comrade — one of the ‘solidarity’ lot, and of Sylvia's party tried to get me in,” he wrote, “but no go.” So he hung about outside the conference. A group of delegates came out, all seemingly BSP members wearing BSP badges. “Most of them looked like minor Trade Union officials,” but he did see “one

genuine member of the working class” who had been “sent off to find a duplicator”:

I felt sorry for him, just a humble cog in this magnificent machine, this inversion of the Soviet principle, when, instead of the power springing from the organised workers in the field, mine, factory and workshop upwards to the central administrative body, a triumphant band of omnipotents stand on the apex and give out their instructions.

“F.L.R.” also queried the cost of the venue — where did the money come from? In the experience of the Leicester SLP, pub landlords — never mind hoteliers — would not let left-wing organizations book rooms because of the clash with their “class interests.”⁹⁸ And when, in December 1921, *The Communist* published an apologetic editorial saying that, until further notice, no payments would be made to those who contributed articles, *The Socialist* was quick to publish a letter of comment. The correspondent, J. Brown, pointed out that *The Communist*’s announcement showed that previously the paper *had* been paying for articles and claimed that “in the majority of cases, articles are from those who were in the way of receiving emoluments for other positions and work (odd jobs!) in the C.P.”⁹⁹

Conclusions

To say that soviet democracy was a myth is not to deny the broadly democratic character of the soviets in their earliest days; it is rather to point up the importance and resonance of the *idea* of soviet democracy, which had a crucial role in the initial attraction of the Russian Revolution, both before and after the Bolsheviks seized power. This idea was an integral part of the vision of a new society of equals.

We need constantly to remind ourselves of what might be called the “bliss was it in that dawn” factor. For so many on the Left, everything about the circumstances of the revolution seemed so unexpected and so without precedent. The socialism that they had hoped — more than expected — to see the beginnings of in their lifetimes now appeared to be within immediate reach. Quite suddenly everything seemed possible.

Belief in the soviets as a “higher” form of democracy was congruent with a pre-existing widespread disposition on the Left to regard the workplace as a more “real” basis for democracy than any geographical constituency. Earlier left-wing commitment to critiques of parliamentary representation and to forms of radical democracy also predisposed British socialists who were already eagerly seeking “real democracy” in some form to view the soviets in this light. A striking example is Sylvia Pankhurst, who began 1917 advocating the referendum, initiative, and recall and within a few months was an active participant at the “Leeds Soviet Convention” and a tireless advocate thereafter of soviet democracy. Long-established opposition to the very idea of “leadership,” as well as suspicion of actual leaders, also contributed to the belief that soviet democracy put the workers at the base of its organizational pyramid in real, literal, control — or at least to the aspiration that it should do so.

Enthusiasm for soviets on the British Left preceded a commitment to, and in nearly all cases any real knowledge of, Bolshevism, as the meeting at Leeds in June 1917 demonstrates. At this stage, hopes for the future of the revolution in Russia were vested in the coming elections for the Constituent Assembly — which the soviets had long been demanding. As regards beliefs about democracy, the forcible dissolution of the assembly early in 1918 was a more crucial turning point for embryonic “British Bolsheviks” than the seizure of power the previous October.

For most people on the Left, including those who would quickly come to reject the actions of the Bolsheviks, the Duma and the various editions of the provisional government had less democratic legitimacy than the soviets. But the crushing of the assembly began to force people — who were often in some uncertainty about how to interpret this development, as is most evident in the case of Pankhurst — to take a definite stand. The claim that the soviets represented a higher, working-class, truly operative form of democracy, one that made the “bourgeois” democracy of the Constituent Assembly redundant, was now voiced — essentially for the first time — by the Bolsheviks and their supporters.

For quite a considerable period, and certainly until sometime after the end of the war, there was a willingness to take such claims seriously on the part of a very broad segment of left-wing opinion that even included, to some degree, such future vehement anti-Communists as Philip Snowden and Ramsay MacDonald. A great deal of attention was given in the various socialist weekly papers both to theoretical appraisals of the alleged democratic superiority of soviets and to descriptions of how they were thought to be operating in revolutionary Russia. The attractions of soviet democracy went well beyond the ranks of those who would eventually join the Communist Party or support one of its “left-wing” rivals such as the SLP, Pankhurst’s organizations, or the libertarian groups committed to “anti-parliamentary communism” traced by Mark Shipway. The view that soviet democracy, as interpreted by the Bolsheviks, was inappropriate for Britain and other “Western” countries but might well suit conditions in Russia was also widespread on the Left generally, including the ILP and, with a De Leonist twist, the SLP.

One exception was *Justice*, which, in addition to its pro-Ally position on the war, rejected the whole Bolshevik enterprise as being totally undemocratic and tyrannical. But *Justice* spoke essentially for the “Old Guard of the S.D.F.,” who were being carried away by time, rather than having much influence with younger generations. In 1914, the BSP was certainly no stranger to sharp debate and internal conflict, but it remained a united organization incorporating the old Social-Democratic values and traditions, which gave a significant role to “strong” forms of radical democracy.

This unity was shattered by the war, and the polarization of the British Social-Democratic tradition was continued by the effects of the Bolshevik seizure of power. Thus, the BSP, having “bought” the notion of soviet democracy wholesale in spite of the doubts cast by Fairchild and Alexander in 1919, evolved into the founding core of the British Communist Party, while the remainder, who eventually reverted to the old Social-Democrat name, proved to be the element of the Left most persistently hostile to Bolshevism and all its work — not excepting

such “right-wing” organs (in socialist terms) as the *New Statesman*. Meanwhile, conflicts over the reality, or otherwise, of soviet democracy in Russia, as well as the issue of how to relate to the new Communist Party and the Third International, beset the guild socialist movement and contributed significantly to its decline, with many of its most active members being recruited into the new party.

To begin with, at least, for many on the British Left the dictatorship of the proletariat meant nothing more than a situation in which, given a political structure founded on the workplace, “bourgeois” elements would be automatically excluded from representation, a plight they could quickly end by taking up socially useful work. Pankhurst’s early campaign for the inclusion of “housewives” in the soviet resolutions passed at Leeds was aimed at the inclusion of many whose socially desirable and necessary work was in danger of being disregarded. But, for some time, the very vagueness and ambiguity of the phrase “dictatorship of the proletariat” helped to obscure what was really at issue. More and more, for those en route to orthodox Communism, the phrase came to be interpreted in terms of the imposed rule of the Communist Party, seen as the vanguard of the working class.

For those who did come to accept the Communist version of soviet democracy, the sense that by joining the Communist Party one was actually becoming an active participant in the ongoing world socialist revolution must have helped to stifle doubts. The “ultra-Left” groups could not offer this sense except in a much fainter and more abstract way. The problem for orthodox Communists was to make a transition from early beliefs in soviet democracy in a “pure” form to the notion of a vanguard party leading the working class, without actually explicitly abandoning the original idea. In the orthodox Communist version, which largely ignored their actual origins, the soviets quickly became a specialized form of working-class organization to be called into being only when the party decreed that a revolution was imminent and then to be led to victory by that party.¹⁰⁰

Before 1914, what can be slightly anachronistically termed the “Left” of the British socialist movement — at the time, the term was

only rarely used in this sense — espoused, and indeed was largely defined by, radical views on “real democracy.” This was recognized by the Fabians in their *Report on Fabian Policy* of 1896 and again ten years later in their Special Committee report. The latter characterized the division of opinion as a “gulf” that “cuts the Labour movement right down the middle.”¹⁰¹ Fabians had no sympathy with the SDF, whose program included demands for “direct democracy,” or the campaigns of Blatchford’s *Clarion* for the referendum and initiative or other manifestations of belief in “primitive democracy.” Fabian democracy — with the resolutely anti-democratic Shaw as an outrider — steered a much more modest and cautious course towards universal suffrage and a vision of democracy as a matter of consent rather than of active participation. The influence of syndicalism and guild socialism added to the mix the new — or revived — ingredient of demands for a democracy based, wholly or partially, on the workplace.

Taken in all its variations, commitment to radical democracy was widespread on the British Left. But how deep was it? How firmly rooted were such ideas? Although the phrase “real democracy” was frequently invoked, there was relatively little development of detailed proposals or analysis of possible problems and objections. Sometimes the cry for “real democracy” seems to have been little more than a convenient stick with which to beat the “bureaucratic” Fabians or the politically ambitious “leaders” — Hardie, MacDonald and Snowden — of the ILP.

Even the most committed exponents of “real democracy” sometimes expressed reservations. One example is the doubt expressed in *Justice* at the time of the South African war as to whether, despite its “abstract justice,” universal suffrage was wise, given the way existing voters were “susceptible to outbursts of jingo feeling.”¹⁰² And in spite of writing three *Clarion* pamphlets advocating the referendum and initiative, Alex Thompson insisted in 1910 that foreign policy and defence issues should be left to “permanent officials unaffected by the fluctuations of party,” with the referendum used only for matters “directly pertaining to the people’s lives and needs.”¹⁰³ Strangely, when one considers what the impact of war just a few years later would be,

these matters did not include, for Thompson, foreign affairs or military issues.

As for the newer strains of radical democracy, old-style Social-Democrats had been wary of syndicalism, suspecting an underlying authoritarianism in its advocacy of “direct action.” S.G. Hobson’s enthusiasm for the building of the Panama canal by the US military was noted near the outset of this book, and, as we saw earlier in this chapter, Kevin Morgan has called attention to the way so many guild socialists, including G.D.H. Cole, were drawn towards Bolshevism, whether or not this included (as it did in many cases) actual enlistment in the Communist ranks. The fragility of many democratic commitments is something that has to be taken into account when we attempt to understand how the “depoliticized” version of soviet democracy came to prevail not only among Communists but considerably beyond their ranks in a conventionally rightward direction, as epitomized by the popularity of the Webbs’ *Soviet Communism* in wider left-wing circles during the 1930s.

Not that the “Bolshevik” convictions that replaced radical social-democracy, syndicalism, or guild socialism necessarily proved any less fragile than the democratic convictions of the pre-Leninist Left. One has only to consider the trajectories of two leading lights of early British communism. One was J.T. Murphy. As I noted in the introduction, Ralph Darlington has characterized Murphy’s passage as one “from syndicalism to communism to left reformism to popular frontism to anti-Marxism.”¹⁰⁴ There are similarities here with the evolution of that other J.T. — J.T. Walton Newbold. In 1935, in the penultimate chapter of *Social-Democracy in Great Britain*, Archbold took evident delight in tracing the path of this “brilliant but unstable research man” from a Quaker background, through pacifism, the ILP, the BSP, and the Communist Party, to the 1922 British general election, in which he was the only successful Communist parliamentary candidate. He continued:

It became evident, however, that the time was not ripe for the appearance of a British “Lenin,” and so the research worker and financial

journalist in him overcame the revolutionary. Another *volte face*, and he became a very definite “Right Winger,” and the protégé of Ramsay MacDonald, J.H. Thomas and Philip Snowden.

Before this, Newbold had joined the re-formed SDF and for a period edited its surviving publication, the *Social-Democrat*. This came to an “abrupt end,” after which he served on the Macmillan Committee on Finance and Industry, set up in 1929. He had been scheduled to speak on the second day of the SDF’s 1931 conference but failed to appear and was soon “in full cry as a supporter of the National Government.” formed by Ramsay MacDonald that same year.¹⁰⁵

It is important to be aware of such inconsistencies and changes of opinion in order to avoid overly schematic accounts of the Left, in which individuals sometimes appear to have played a much more stable role than was actually the case when their full trajectory is taken into account. Perhaps we can do no more than conclude — with respect both to the sometime proponents of pre-Bolshevik currents of radical socialist democracy and to those who were drawn, at least temporarily, by the magnetic attraction of Bolshevism — that early-twentieth-century British socialists were no more consistent than the rest of us.

Those on the far Left who remained committed to “council communism” found themselves in an increasingly isolated position, cut off from mainstream Labour by their anti-parliamentarism while at the same time cutting themselves off from what seemed for so many to be the only viable alternative, the CPGB. But, as politically insignificant minorities, they struggled on for as long as they could.¹⁰⁶ It is perhaps not surprising that, as Shipway has shown, those who had always been the least likely to be pulled into the Bolshevik orbit — the anarchist supporters of soviet democracy — seem to have been most resilient, with one of their most prominent figures, Guy Aldred, still actively engaged in promoting the idea of “anti-parliamentary communism” until his death in 1963.¹⁰⁷ For them and other supporters of “real” soviets uncontaminated by Communist manipulation and domination, soviet democracy would, in the final words of Israel Getzler’s history

of the Kronstadt soviet, “remain but an unfulfilled promise of the Russian revolution.”¹⁰⁸

To grasp the importance of the myth of soviet democracy it is only necessary to consider what the effect on the Left in Britain and elsewhere would have been had the Bolsheviks seized power *without* claiming to be installing soviet democracy. In Russia, the claim that “all power” had been taken by the soviets provided the vital camouflage for the October Revolution. In Britain, it enlisted the support of wide sections of the Left, particularly those most critical of the shortcomings of “bourgeois” democracy and especially those sympathetic to the syndicalist and guild socialist insistence on the primacy of the workplace. The myth of soviet democracy was crucial in establishing a sense of the legitimacy of Communist rule.

Broad-based support for Bolshevism eventually began to fall away — as the case of the ILP in 1920 and 1921 demonstrates — but, in hindsight, it took a surprisingly long time in doing so. And even among those who rejected the USSR as a model for the future of Britain, there often remained more than a few vestiges of the feeling that however unrealistic, inappropriate, and undesirable the Communist version of soviet democracy might be at home, it was perhaps real, worthwhile, and necessary *there*.

For those on the Left who rejected the Communist dictatorship, giving their wholehearted support to a Labour Party, albeit one that had little time for radical ideas of extending or deepening democracy, must have seemed the only viable and thus sensible alternative. This would have been particularly so after the ILP disaffiliation from Labour in 1932 began the marginalization of that relatively large constituency, which had become a sort of residuary legatee of pre-Bolshevik radical democracy. Such ideas increasingly found themselves almost squeezed out between the cautious and conservative “parliamentary socialism” of the Labour Party and a CPGB, in whose early appeal the notion of soviet democracy had been a key ingredient. And, in its depoliticized form, soviet democracy would remain central to a utopian vision of the “new civilization” being built in the USSR.