Conflicts over Russian foreign policy and Abyssinia were qualitatively different from the divisions that were opened up by the Spanish Civil War and the show trials that marked the height of what would become known as Stalin’s Great Terror. With the earlier issues, the argument had been about the wisdom of the road taken and the perceived lack of revolutionary principle involved. This time, they were literally about life or death issues. Questions were raised about Soviet ethics—not just about political judgment and policies. The trials and purges instituted by Stalin coincided with the Spanish war. In the three years leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War, the attitude in the ILP towards the USSR would shift considerably.

Spain and the Moscow Trials

In early 1936, the New Leader was cautious about recent events in Russia. It was not, Brockway wrote, prepared to accept Trotsky’s charges of “persecution of Opposition Communists” without an “impartial investigation.” But he noted that the Comintern response was “not reassuring.” Then, in August, a few weeks after the outbreak of civil war in Spain, the same issue that headlined “Spanish Workers Fight for Soviets” featured Brockway’s article “Doubts Caused by the Moscow Trial.” He concluded that “Stalin may make a purge of his critics; but this trial has been a bad day’s work for Soviet Russia.” The first of the three main show trials, this one known as the “Trial of the Sixteen,” had finished a few days earlier with death sentences for the defendants.

The same issue of the paper also reported that John McNair, the assistant secretary of the International Bureau, was going to Spain as the ILP’s envoy. The following week, McNair reported on what he had found in “Workers Control Everything in Catalonia.” This marked the beginning of intense ILP involvement with Spain. In contrast to the rather theoretical conflicts over Abyssinia, this involvement would be highly practical and would lead to actual participation in the fighting by members of the ILP.
Political turmoil was nothing new for interwar Spain. But when Franco’s July 1936 military revolt against the democratically elected Republican government developed into full-scale civil war, Spain was seen by most on the Left, not the least by the ILP, as another European state in grave danger of falling into fascism. This apparent threat was reinforced by the support for Franco, including significant armed intervention, that quickly came from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Britain and France followed a policy of non-intervention, however, leaving the Republicans increasingly reliant on Russian support and armaments. Thousands of foreign supporters of the Republic, by no means all of them Communists, fought in the International Brigades organized by the Comintern, although, as we shall see, a different path was followed by most ILP volunteers.

In spite of these efforts, the war ended with the installation of Franco, who would act as dictator until his death in 1975. For the ILP, the war marked a distinct turning point in its relationship with the Communists. For later generations, the ILP’s experience of the war has been most often understood via George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*. As we shall see, Orwell served with some of the ILP contingent, though he was not an ILP member at the time.

In its report to the 1937 annual conference in Glasgow, the NAC gave an account of what had been done in response to the Spanish events. Within a month of the “Fascist putsch,” the council had sent John McNair to Barcelona. The ILP had raised over £2,000 to support the struggle, and after the news—which later turned out not to be true—that the leader of the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM), Joaquin Maurin, had been shot by Franco, the ILP equipped a military ambulance named after him. A pamphlet by McNair titled *In Spain Now!* had been published in 1936, along with the “undelivered speeches” of Julián Gorkin, another of the POUM’s leaders. Early the following year, the London Division had published Jack Huntz’s *Spotlight on Spain*, and, in another fund-raising effort, Edward Fletcher and Roland Penrose had visited Spain to gather materials for an exhibition of Spanish art, which opened in February 1937.

In addition, the report noted that McGovern had also visited Spain in order to get information about the attitude of the Catholic Church, with the resulting pamphlet, *Why Bishops Back Franco*, selling twenty-eight thousand copies. But most significant of all for what followed, the report mentioned that an ILP contingent, “on the initiative of Bob Edwards,” had joined the POUM militia and that Bob Smillie was among those who had “enlisted.” The grandson of the Scottish miners’ leader Robert Smillie, Bob Smillie was prominent in the ILP’s Guild of Youth. His death in Spain in ambiguous circumstances would become a *cause célèbre* for the ILP later in 1937.
“The Moscow Trial: An International Investigation Required” headlined the New Leader in January 1937. The article reported the execution of the sixteen defendants in the show trial, including the prominent Bolshevik leaders Zinoviev and Kamenev. The NAC maintained its cautious position, confining itself to a resolution calling for the setting up of an “impartial investigation by representative Socialists who have the confidence of the working class.” In the meantime, the party was instructed to refrain from coming to any premature judgment. That this was still a divisive issue in the ILP, even though the RPC had decamped to the CPGB nearly eighteen months earlier, is evident from the postconference reports in the Leader in early April.

The NAC’s motion, while acclaiming the October revolution as “the greatest event in working-class history,” focused on “causes of disquiet,” which included the Moscow trials, the growing differentiation of income, the reintroduction of the right of inheritance, and foreign policy. The NAC, said the Leader, was, “assailed from both sides—from those who wanted no criticism of Soviet Russia and those who wanted severer criticism.” The trials were defended by Jack Huntz and Bill Jones but attacked as “frame-ups” by Patterson of the Clapham branch, who “did not hide his support of Leon Trotsky,” and Cund, of Liverpool. Amendments from both sides of the issue were defeated, and the conference overwhelmingly endorsed the NAC’s report.

The POUM, the ILP, and Trotskyism

The NAC report included this statement, in bold: “The Party has identified itself with the political line of the POUM and has energetically repudiated the attacks which have been made upon the POUM by the Communist International.” Though the ILP was still attempting to achieve unity with the Communists, as well as with the rest of what they regarded as the working-class movement, its efforts were complicated and ultimately doomed, as far as the Communists were concerned, by the overriding context of the Stalin-Trotsky conflict. As we have seen, as early as 1934, the Comintern was associating Brockway’s criticisms of Russian foreign policy with the “anti-Soviet slanders of the counterrevolutionary traitor, Trotsky.” The ILP’s relationship with the POUM, a fellow affiliate of the International Bureau, became the focus for ferocious Communist criticism.

In February 1937, the New Leader had reported on the “Agreement Against Calumny” put forward in Spain by the POUM and the Iberian Anarchist Federation (Federación Anarquista Ibérica, or FAI). The Leader printed the text in bold: “We undertake not to make use in our political campaigns of defamation or calumny against other anti-Fascist organisations. We agree to avoid all actions which may ferment discord in the anti-Fascist front.” But,
ominously, the paper also reported that the Spanish Communist Party had not signed this agreement.14

The ILP’s identification with the POUM was total. “We Are Proud of P.O.U.M.” declared the headline of a New Leader article by John McNair.15 Orwell’s biographer, Bernard Crick, describes the POUM as “the ILP’s ideal self-image.”16 Some historians seem to have accepted the Communist view that the POUM was a Trotskyist organization, though they are not always consistent in the way they describe it. On at least one occasion, Paul Preston refers to it as “quasi-Trotskyist.”17 In the list of organizations in Hugh Thomas’s classic account of the Spanish Civil War, the POUM is described simply as “Trotskyist,” while in the text itself, it is referred to as “the semi-Trotskyist Marxist party,” a label that is also used by Ian Slater in his book on Orwell.18

Such designations raise questions about their possible meanings and implications. In his book Workers’ Front, Brockway writes that the POUM might “be described as a Leninist Communist Party,” which goes some way towards explaining why some find it difficult to differentiate it from a Trotskyist organization.19 Crick, in his Orwell biography, notes that the POUM leader Andrés Nin had been an early follower of Trotsky but, having found him “too egocentric and dogmatic,” had broken off any contact with him in 1934.20

At the time, Brockway was adamant about the matter:

The P.O.U.M. is not a Trotskyist party. In its own official statement, published on May 11th, it said: “We do not hold a point of view in common with Trotsky.” There is a Trotskyist group in the P.O.U.M. as there is in other sections of the working class, but it is small and has no representatives on the Executive Committee. Andres Nin [sic] and a section of the Party used to belong to a Trotskyist organisation, but when Trotsky issued orders that they should join the Socialist Party, they refused and joined with the Workers’ and Peasants’ Bloc, led by Joaquin Maurin [sic] and Julien Gorkin [sic] to form the P.O.U.M. Since then there has been a complete break with Trotsky and “La Batalla” has quite recently carried articles attacking Trotskyism.

Brockway then added—in bold: “It is the custom now of the Communist Party to denounce any Socialists who maintain a revolutionary attitude as Trotskyists. This is only to cloak the departure of the Communist Party itself from a revolutionary policy.”21

The ILP itself certainly included some Trotskyists, though they were neither numerous nor united. C. L. R. James, as mentioned earlier, had been prominent in the debates over Abyssinia. Most belonged to the Marxist Group, whose members joined the ILP in February 1934 but left in October 1936, with
James taking the initiative in successfully arguing for abandoning the allegedly “centrist” party. In itself, this would seem sufficient to refute any suggestion that the ILP was Trotskyist.22 Earlier in 1936, the New Leader, in an editorial, had rejected Trotsky’s criticism of the International Bureau for Revolutionary Socialist Unity for having no common policy; he should be using his prestige, the editor wrote, to “bring all Revolutionary Socialists together” instead of “exaggerating differences from the sectarian angle of his own collection of groups.”23

Whether the ILP was democratic centralist or not, there was always a considerable range of views within the party, as the three-way split over Abyssinia had amply demonstrated. Insofar as one can identify a mainstream position in the ILP, it had at least as much in common with the “Left Communism” of the early 1920s, with its idealized notion of soviet democracy, as with the “Bolshevik-Leninism” of Trotsky’s followers.24 Regardless of the divisions in the party, in 1937, ILP concerns about events in Spain and Russia grew. So did the hostility of the Communists with whom it aspired to achieve “unity.”

The Barcelona Events and the Death of Bob Smillie

When the 1937 ILP conference met in Glasgow, tensions were already building between the Communists in Barcelona and the POUM and its anarchist allies. Fighting broke out on 3 May. Even before this, the Daily Worker, in the article “Destroying Its Name and Tradition,” had accused the ILP conference of sabotage itself through association with the “treacherous record” of the POUM. As for the ILP debate on Russia, the party had, said the Worker, “boiled down to passing lip-service to the great triumphs of the past 20 years with all the emphasis laid on criticisms based on Trotskyite fictions.”25

At first, the New Leader called for judgment to be suspended on events in Barcelona pending clarification, adding, “The I.L.P. has supported P.O.U.M. in its stand for the Workers’ Revolution as the answer to Fascism, but we have also used our influence to maintain Workers’ unity in the anti-Fascist struggle.”26 Then, a week later, the front page was devoted to the POUM’s official reply: “The Truth About Barcelona.”27 This was followed by Brockway’s pamphlet under the same title that maintained and even strengthened the close identification of the ILP with the POUM. In the list of organizations at the beginning of the pamphlet, the POUM was described as the “I.L.P. of Spain.” Brockway linked the difficulties of the USSR in revolutionary Catalonia directly to the Soviet foreign policy he had been criticizing for the previous four years, one that “aimed at securing an alliance with France, Britain and the ‘democratic capitalist’ countries.” But, as he went on to point out, “These countries would never enter such an alliance if Russia encouraged revolutions. It was therefore
a matter of importance to Russia that its arms should be used in Spain only for parliamentary democracy.” With this end in view, the Soviet Union had imposed conditions on the military aid it was giving to the Spanish republic, Brockway said. These included the exclusion of the POUM from government and administration and the “separation of the war from the revolution.”

After the POUM’s exclusion, “the Government began to assume an openly counter-revolutionary character,” Brockway argued. He dismissed the charge that the POUM was responsible for the uprising in the Catalan capital, instead blaming the anarchist group Friends of Durrutti, which had been immediately disowned by the anarchist leadership. According to Brockway, the POUM leadership had faith that “in time the workers would protest against the counter-revolution which the Government was carrying through.” As a working-class party, the POUM thus had to “associate” itself with the spontaneous movement in Barcelona once it began. Brockway compared the POUM’s support for the uprising to that given by Lenin and the Bolsheviks to the July 1917 uprising in Petrograd against what he described as Kerensky’s version of a “popular front” government. He quoted a paragraph from John Reed’s account of the events in Petrograd in Ten Days That Shook the World, as well as a recent judgment by the former New Leader editor H. N. Brailsford. Brailsford maintained that the POUM “represented the older and now heretical position,” adding that “the Communist Party is no longer a party of the industrial workers or even a Marxist Party.”

The ILP had often made even harsher comments about the CPGB, as we saw earlier, and these had been reciprocated. But only in May 1937 did anyone in either party come close to calling for the deaths of members of the rival organization. Palme Dutt, citing a New Leader report by McNair, wrote in the Daily Worker that the ILP volunteers in Barcelona had “served under the P.O.U.M. in this armed rising against the Spanish People’s Front and its constituted authorities—an act of treason which in any war would be punishable by death.” “Spanish Trotskyists Plot with Franco” proclaimed a headline in the Worker a month later, again underscoring the CPGB’s allegation that members of the POUM were engaged in a full-scale “fifth columnist” conspiracy with the fascists.

But, despite such accusations from the CPGB, the New Leader denied that disagreements over Spain were wrecking the unity movement in Britain. The objective was not to unify the ILP and the CPGB, the paper reminded its readers, but to promote united action on issues on which the two parties agreed. The paper soon reported, however, that the Daily Worker had, unsurprisingly, refused to take an advertisement for Brockway’s The Truth About Barcelona and had published its own dismissive response to the book.
The reliance of the Republican cause on Soviet support enabled the Communists to play a more dominant role, and they used the opportunity to suppress their allegedly Trotskyist opponents in the POUM. These included the ILP volunteers, who were soon forced to flee Spain. It was in this context that, in June 1937, news arrived of the death of Bob Smillie. His arrest and imprisonment—“entirely unjust” in Hugh Thomas’s words—had taken place as he was about to leave Spain. He had subsequently died, apparently of appendicitis. The 18 June issue of the New Leader carried an obituary written by John McNair, and the ILP also published an eight-page booklet, We Carry On: Our Tribute to Bob Smillie, written by Dan McArthur, the chairman of the Scottish ILP Guild of Youth, with a foreword by Maxton.

Neither McNair nor McArthur offered any explanation of Smillie’s death, although Brockway investigated the circumstances, along with ILP member and freelance journalist David Murray and Julián Gorkin of the POUM. They concluded that Smillie had not been provided with the medical attention he needed while in prison but that there was no evidence that his death was due to other circumstances. And, with that, the ILP leadership seemed content to let the matter rest. Writing about Smillie’s death, Tom Buchanan suggests a number of reasons why the ILP refrained from attempts to politicize the incident, foremost among them a wish to protect the reputation of the Spanish Republic, to avoid jeopardizing the situation of other prisoners held in similar circumstances, and to preserve its relations with the CPGB. As far as one can judge, these factors certainly played a large part. But at least one additional factor was almost certainly at work, namely, a desire on the part of the ILP’s leaders to protect both themselves and the POUM against renewed charges of Trotskyism and alleged collaboration with Franco.

As Buchanan notes, at its meeting in December, the NAC received a resolution from Yorkshire’s Dewsbury branch expressing “dissatisfaction regarding the ‘mystery’ surrounding the death of Comrade Bob Smillie.” By way of response, the NAC chose simply to endorse the results of the investigation conducted by Brockway, Murray, and Gorkin. Evidently, then, the leaders of the ILP had no interest in reopening the question. The next item in the minutes, which also concerned the Dewsbury branch, sheds light on their possible motives. Percy Williams, who represented the Yorkshire Division, reported that, under the influence of one P.J. Barclay, “a programme of lectures had been arranged including a number of Trotskyist speakers who were not members of the Branch.” The NAC duly warned the Yorkshire Division, as well as the Lancashire and North East divisions, not to acquiesce to Barclay’s Trotskyist “advances.”
As, in combination, these two items suggest, the \textit{ILP} leadership must have suspected that any further probing of the “mystery” of Smillie’s death would be used by the Communists as proof of Trotskyism not only within the \textit{ILP} and its Spanish counterpart, the \textit{POUM}, but also within the other affiliates of the International Bureau for Revolutionary Socialist Unity. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that another item on the agenda of the same \textit{NAC} meeting concerned efforts to secure amnesty for all “anti-Fascist prisoners.”

In pursuit of this goal, a delegation from the International Bureau, led by the French human rights advocate Félicien Challaye, visited Spain; Maxton and McGovern gained an interview with the British Foreign Secretary; and a group of \textit{ILP} MPs paid a visit to the Spanish embassy. Suspicions of Trotskyism would have helped none of these initiatives.

All that said, the \textit{NAC} did publish a report that concluded, “We consider that Bob Smillie’s death was due to great carelessness on the part of the responsible authorities, which amounted to criminal negligence,” repeating this statement in its annual report to the 1938 conference. As Brockway would write forty years later, “A strong boy should not have died of appendicitis.”

Meanwhile, in August 1937, the \textit{New Leader} had reported the murder of the \textit{POUM} leader Andrés Nin. The \textit{NKVD}, the Soviet Union’s central intelligence agency, under its chief operative in Spain, Alexander Orlov, was suspected as being responsible, although that had not yet been proven. In spite of the \textit{ILP}’s desire to support a united front, both in Britain and Spain, the party was increasingly riven with doubts not only about the activities and policies of Comintern and its affiliates in Spain but also about the realities of the situation in the Soviet Union itself.

\textbf{Growing Doubts About the Soviet Union}

Along with outrage over the Soviet role in Spain and the use of the Comintern as “an instrument of the foreign policy of Soviet Russia,” as Brockway charged in his pamphlet on Barcelona, more criticism of the state of affairs in the \textit{USSR} was starting to appear in the \textit{New Leader}. A magazine section included a review of Max Eastman’s \textit{The End of Socialism in Russia}. The reviewer, William Warbey, conceded that its author was “unbalanced by hatred of Stalinism” but went on to cast doubt on the claims made in Pat Sloan’s \textit{Soviet Democracy}, recently published by Gollancz as part of the Left Book Club series:

It is precisely on this question of democracy, of the extent to which the dictatorship of the proletariat is, in fact as well as in theory, a democracy for the vast majority of the people, or is, on the other hand, the dictatorship of a small section of the proletariat over the rest, that Sloan is most
unsatisfactory. He is particularly shaky on the fundamental question of the right to the expression of opposition opinion.

Yet just how difficult it was for at least some in the ILP to appreciate the real state of affairs in the USSR is illustrated by Maxton’s June 1937 review of Trotsky’s *The Revolution Betrayed*. Maxton was willing to concede that “though Trotsky has not justified his title, he has made out a case that deserves the earnest consideration of every active Socialist and Communist in Russia and elsewhere. Stalin should weigh it carefully and consider whether some parts of the criticism are not justified.” Ironically, Maxton’s display of optimistic faith in the power of reasoned critique was published just days before the CPGB’s *Daily Worker* ran the banner headline “Red Army Traitors Executed,” shortly followed by an article by Page Arnot titled “The Trial of the Eight Traitors—And Why.”

At the same time, though, signs of the emergence of a much more critical view of Russia had already begun to appear. In the issue of the *New Leader* that reported Smillie’s death, an issue published the same day as Arnot’s article in the *Worker*, Brockway’s editorial “Something Wrong in Russia” asked how the trials could be explained. Did the Russian leaders understand “the setback which has been given to the cause of Socialism in all countries?” It seemed that all who were critical of the Popular Front policy “must be treated like fascists” and “dismissed as Trotskyists,” he complained. “And this in the name of democracy!” The following week, denouncing the charges being brought against leaders of the POUM as a “frame-up,” Brockway emphatically predicted that “the repetition of the tactic in Spain will destroy what little authority the Communist Parties retain.” He went on to note that Brailsford, whose name was again appearing from time to time in the *New Leader*, had once been “sympathetic to the Communist line in Spain.” Now, disillusioned, the former editor was writing of the Soviet purges that what had really happened would never be known “because in Russia there is neither honest justice nor free discussion.”

While in mid-July, the *Daily Worker* greeted the new electoral law in Russia as a guarantee of democracy, Brockway, writing in the *New Leader*, continued to denounce both what he saw as the “Communist conspiracy against P.O.U.M.” and the shooting of the Russian generals. He concluded, citing the *New Statesman*, that “it is the vice of dictatorship that there is no definite line between a difference of policy and treason, and no way of pressing one’s policy except by plotting against the head of the State.”

In November, responding to claims about what were said to be the first democratic elections in Russia since the revolution, the *New Leader* commented:
The unreal “democracy” of these elections is not the democracy which Russia needs. Russia needs proletarian democracy—democracy, first, within the organisation of the Communist Party so that freedom of expression in determining policy will be permitted; democracy, second, within the State so that the working masses may freely read and discuss the issues of Socialist policy and decide the line to be followed.

In the same issue, Maxton urged the Soviet leaders and “their representatives in this and other lands” to consider whether their “present tactics of ruthless suppression and unrestrained slander of those who dare to offer even friendly criticism is in the best interests of World Socialism, the working-class movement, or the Soviet Union itself.” And, on the eve of Christmas, the Leader concluded that “it is time that the Working Class Movement made clear to the Soviet authorities the opinion of the mass of workers in all countries.”

Criticism along the same lines continued into the new year, with Brockway asking: “Does anyone believe . . . that if real proletarian democracy existed in Russia, or even real democracy in its Communist Party, it would be possible for any dangerous movement of sabotage against the Social Revolution to lift its head there?”

Six weeks later, C. A. Smith made one of the most outspoken attacks on the Russian dictator to appear in the New Leader. It was, he said, “curious that the Communist Party should support two men each of whom have killed more communists than any other man who ever lived; Chiang-kai-Shek it supports ‘critically’; Stalin it supports entirely uncritically.” When another trial, with Bukharin among the accused, began, the New Leader editor expressed the belief that “few Socialists who know the prisoners and their records will be able to believe that they have been guilty of the charges made.”

On 11 March, a letter to Stalin was dispatched signed by the four ILP MPs and Brockway. It was published in the Leader on the same day under the headline “STALIN—STOP! A Powerful Appeal to Moscow from the I.L.P. M.Ps.” Brockway would later explain that the letter was written following a discussion with “Jay Lovestone, the leader of the Communist Opposition in America, and he urged me that the duty of issuing a supreme appeal to Stalin to save the honour of Socialism by stopping the ‘terror’ rested with the I.L.P.” The letter began by asserting that the signatories were among the first British workers in 1917 “to hail the victory of the Russian workers.” They were now shocked by the recent trials in the U.S.S.R. and “compelled to protest.” They could never be convinced of the charges; “the inconceivable character of the alleged crimes not only fail to convince—they have the opposite effect.”

Were the charges true, the letter continued, they should have to conclude that “there was something inherently wrong with the Russian Revolution to
The ILP and the USSR

attract such degenerate types to the top of the ladder of leadership”—a notion they unreservedly rejected. The trials were not examples of “working-class justice” but “an outrageous travesty on the most elementary human rights and a bestial crime” resulting from “the system of bureaucracy which has grown up since the time of Lenin.” Stalin was urged to “stop these trials and killings” and to “empty the Soviet prisons of the workers now languishing in them—and restore U.S.S.R. to its rightful place—the vanguard of humanity.” As well as appearing in the Leader and as an appendix to the NAC’s annual report, the letter was published as a leaflet titled The Moscow Trials: Text of a Letter Written to M. Stalin by the Independent Labour Party’s MP’s.

In the New Leader, Brockway wrote that “the question mark over Russia is whether the Socialist economic basis beneath will succeed in expressing itself politically, or whether the bureaucracy will destroy the Socialist basis first.” The following month, he took note of a motion, submitted by one branch of the ILP for consideration at the upcoming annual conference, proposing that, on the basis of “the information available,” the party endorse the results of the Moscow trials. Brockway predicted that such a motion was likely to find little support among delegates, who were bound to “find it difficult to believe that six thousand persons, many of them with revolutionary records of undoubted sincerity,” had all managed to become “the tools of the Capitalist class.”

It is not surprising, then, that in its report on the 1938 annual conference, the New Leader noted that “one voice was raised in the Conference for silence about Russia when we cannot praise. One voice was raised in defence of the Moscow Trials. There were only two votes in 111 for this view.” The report continued, “Nevertheless, an overwhelming majority held that the basis of a Workers’ and Socialist State remains in Russia and demands working-class action to defend it against Imperialist aggression.”

Coming on the heels of a resounding condemnation of the Moscow trials, this opinion reflected a gap that had long existed within the ILP, namely, that between the suspicion and often hostile disdain in which the CPGB and, to a lesser extent, the Comintern were held and the esteem that the Soviet Union itself enjoyed. Yet the combined effect of Stalin’s show trials and the experience of the Spanish war—above all, the implications of the events in Barcelona and what followed—had shifted attitudes in the ILP. While no doubt the trials and the events in Spain were the major catalysts for the growing disquiet about the Soviet Union, there were other causes for concern as well. In his 1938 volume Workers’ Front, under the heading “The Sickness of the Labour Movement,” Brockway wrote: “Even in Soviet Russia where workers’ power was gloriously won in 1917, the increased differentiation of income and the reintroduction of the right of inheritance indicate a retreat from the classless society of Socialism rather than an advance towards it.”
Under Siege

At the same time, as long as the civil war in Spain continued, the ILP faced a dilemma. With the British and French governments pursuing policies of “non-intervention” and Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany showing no restraint in their support of Franco, the Soviet Union was the sole supplier of military resources to the Spanish Republic. Any criticism of it could therefore be presented as an attempt to undermine the only powerful friend of those resisting fascism in Spain. At the same time, how could the purges and show trials be ignored? The ILP could not be seen as condoning such appalling actions.

As events in Spain unfolded, it also became ever harder to maintain a line of separation between the USSR, as an exemplary workers’ state, and the Comintern—a gap that, for some, had narrowed almost to the point of extinction. The cover of John McGovern’s 1938 pamphlet Terror in Spain carried as a sub-title “How the Communist International Destroyed Working-Class Unity, Undermined the Fight Against Franco, and Suppressed the Social Revolution.” In it, McGovern attacked “Cheka Limited,” calling it “the vicious machine of Comintern.” (Although the Russian secret police had not been called the Cheka since 1922, the term was still widely used in this sense.) McGovern explicitly linked Cheka-style activities in Spain to the Soviet Union. “Russia has bought her way into Spain,” he wrote. “In return for Russian assistance in arms, Comintern has been given this tyrannical power and she uses it to imprison, torture, and murder Socialists who do not accept the Communist line.” His pamphlet concluded: “If Socialism means what Moscow imposes, I would not want it. The Socialism I work for must give freedom, not tyranny, to the workers. All tyrannies I will denounce.”

McGovern was a particularly outspoken critic of the Soviet Union. Following the Munich crisis of late September 1938, however, when Fenner Brockway addressed the Holborn and St. Pancras Group of the Peace Pledge Union on pacifism as it related to the Left, he left no doubt about his views. He told the participants that, as regards the Moscow trials, “every allegation which could be tested because it related to some incident supposed to have taken place outside Russia has been found to be false on thorough investigation.” In Spain, the Communists had engaged in “lying, forgery and assassination against another working-class party, the P.O.U.M., because of a disagreement in policy.” He repeated his contention that in Russia, there was a conflict between “the socialist economy” and the “system of bureaucracy.” His assessment was perhaps indebted, at least in part, to Orwell’s Homage to Catalonia.

Orwell in Spain and in the ILP

Perhaps more than anyone else in the twentieth century, George Orwell came to personify the left-wing rejection of Stalinism. There would be no more
powerful support for the ILP’s position on the Spanish Civil War than his classic account, Homage to Catalonia. Within days of its publication in April 1938, it was advertised in the New Leader as “the most exciting of any book that has yet come out of Spain.” The following week, it was reviewed by John McNair, who quoted extensively from the book and said of the author, “So far as I know he is a member of no political party.”

Orwell had, of course, served with ILP volunteers in the POUM militia, under his real name, Eric Blair. According to his biographer Bernard Crick, Orwell was under the impression that papers from a left-wing organization were needed in order to enter Spain. Orwell declined to join the International Brigade until he had seen the Spanish situation for himself, and Pollitt, the CPGB’s general secretary, to whom he had been introduced by John Strachey, refused to help him. Orwell then rang the ILP, with which he claimed “some slight connections, mainly personal,” and Brockway gave him letters of introduction to John McNair, the ILP representative in Barcelona. Orwell was also put in touch with ILPers who were waiting to depart for Spain, but he went on ahead, reaching Barcelona on 26 December 1936. (The ILP contingent arrived two weeks later.) Once in Spain, he accepted McNair’s offer to join the POUM militia.

Orwell’s The Road to Wigan Pier was published in March 1937, several months after his departure, and was reviewed for the New Leader by Ethel Mannin under the heading “Sense and a Lot of Nonsense.” While critical of Orwell’s “particular aversion” to the ILP, which he regarded “as middle class and snobbish,” she declared the book “worthwhile for its first part,” in which Orwell documents the appalling conditions of the working class in England’s industrial north. Mannin felt that Orwell was “a good Socialist,” despite his “curious fixed ideas” that socialists were all too often “‘bearded fruit-juice drinkers,’ ‘sandal-wearers,’ nudists, sex-maniacs, and heaven knows what.” She went on to tell New Leader readers that “he is at this moment fighting with P.O.U.M. (in Bob Edwards’ contingent) on the Aragon Front, and it may well be that he has already outgrown the confused and contradictory ideas set forth in the second part of this book.”

Evidently, George Kopp, who commanded ILP volunteers on the Aragon Front, was pleased with Orwell’s service. In a letter written on 16 April 1937, he mentioned “Eric Blair,” along with Bob Smillie and Paddy Donovan, as those “who behaved exceptionally well.” The 1937 ILP summer school, held in Letchworth, opened on 5 August with a two-minute silence for Smillie, who had died in June. Then both Orwell and Donovan spoke, Orwell with some difficulty because of a bullet wound he had sustained in the throat. Other former members of the ILP contingent in Spain were also in attendance.
Reporting on the summer school session, the *New Leader* noted that one of its features had been

the mounting revelation of the reactionary character of Communist Party policy in Spain. Most of the I.L.P. students were aware of the position in broad outline, but the piling up of facts, first by John McNair and then by Jeanne Antonino, supplemented by the simple direct statements of the members of the I.L.P. contingent, have produced an overwhelming effect.\(^6\)

These revelations were both reflected and reinforced in *Homage to Catalonia*, with its sometimes trenchant criticisms of the Spanish Communists. As Buchanan points out, even if *Homage to Catalonia* was Orwell’s “least successful book” in his own lifetime, it was for the I.L.P., a vindication—from an independent source, at least at the time it was written—of the anti-Stalinist position the party had adopted.\(^6\)

When, in September 1937, the *Leader* published an account of what had happened in Barcelona, based on the recollections of some of the members of the I.L.P contingent, the writer emphasized that Orwell was “not a member of the I.L.P.”\(^6\) Crick speculates that it was the positive response of the I.L.P to *Homage to Catalonia* that prompted Orwell to join the party, rather than remaining “an I.L.P fellow-traveller.” Orwell became an I.L.P member on 13 June 1938, and his “Why I Joined the I.L.P” appeared in the *Leader* on 24 June. It was, he said, the only British party that “aims at anything I should regard as Socialism,” although he emphasized that he also hoped for the electoral success of Labour.\(^6\) Two weeks later, Orwell reviewed Frank Jellinik’s *The Civil War in Spain*, describing it as “an excellent book” in spite of its unfairness to the POUM and the fact that it was written from the perspective of “a Communist or Communist partisan.”\(^7\)

Orwell’s membership in the I.L.P was not to last long: he left the party over its stance after the outbreak of war.\(^7\) By that time, at least some in the I.L.P had abandoned any hope that the Soviet Union could be portrayed as some kind of exemplary “workers’ state,” and there was little appetite within the party for more attempts at cooperation with the CPGB. In September 1938, the *New Leader* carried a report of a visit to the CPGB congress, whose writer said that he found “the uniformity of the speakers absolutely terrifying”:

> The C.P is evidently as much an automaton as any Nazi party. The delegates acted as one man, sang the “International,” clapped, shouted “Hurrah,” stood up in respectful show of admiration, waiting for signals to cheer or sing, just as you would expect a trained corps of Nazis to do.

> There can be no hope that a party of this kind can bring human liberty.\(^7\)
Of course, disillusion triggered by the Moscow trials and the executions that followed extended far beyond the ILP. No doubt Brockway was right when he said that “reaction has gone wide and deep into the ranks of the working class.” In October 1938, another trial took place, in Barcelona—this one of prominent members of the POUM. In April 1939, in its report to the ILP’s annual conference, the NAC declared that the trial had “disproved the infamous slanders made against our brother-Party by the Communist International,” which had claimed that POUM members were agents of Franco and had “treacherously deserted the front.” The report went on to note that, although those tried had been convicted for their part in “the Barcelona May 1937 resistance to the attacks . . . on the workers’ rights,” they had subsequently “found refuge in France.” In a letter to Raymond Postgate, written on 21 October 1938 from Marrakesh, Orwell left no doubt about his own view of the proceedings. “The accusations against the P.O.U.M. in Spain are only a by-product of the Russian Trotskyist trials,” he stated, adding that “from the start every kind of lie, including flagrant absurdities, has been circulated in the Communist press.”

Other ILP Critics of the Soviet Union

The Moscow trials and, above all, the events in Spain were the major issues that began to generate criticism of the USSR. Although most members of the ILP continued to regard the Soviet Union as “a Workers’ State in which the foundations of a Socialist Society have been laid,” notions that all was not as ILPers thought it should be were beginning to be expressed increasingly in the final three years of the 1930s. As Jennie Lee put it in a review of Walter Citrine’s book I Search for Truth in Russia, “Sensible people have a healthy scepticism of the ‘pure sugar-candy’ versions of the Soviet Union that the Communist Press and propagandists pour forth.”

In May 1936, for example, there was a letter in the New Leader from Mrs. G. Carling of Perth who was “uneasy” about new divorce law proposals in Russia, which seemed in danger of worsening the position of women. Six months later, the New Leader carried a review of John Strachey’s The Theory and Practice of Socialism. The reviewer, William Everett, conceded that the book had some good features but noted that it made three false assertions: that socialism had been established in Russia since 1928; that effective democracy now existed there; and that socialism did not necessarily entail economic equality, which was neither practicable nor desirable. He also criticized the “careful suppression of the facts about the C.P. in Catalonia” and regretted Strachey’s “degradation” into “a C.P. Yes-man.”

The USSR still won plenty of support and admiration in the New Leader, but critics were beginning to be much more prominent. One early critic was
Ethel Mannin, whose articles and reviews appeared fairly frequently in the *New Leader.* After a seven thousand-mile “unconducted tour” of Russia, she reported her conclusion that it was “not yet the Promised Land,” though still a “Promising Land.” She did, however, note inequalities, poor living conditions, and the privileges of commissars, and concluded, “Taking all these things into consideration, not excluding its militarism and its foreign policy, it is impossible not to see Russia to-day as a gigantic question mark, and anxiously ask concerning it—Quo Vadis?”

Mannin’s criticisms triggered complaints. One letter in the *New Leader* urged her to “leave this sort of unfairness to anti-Socialist propagandists.” Mannin defended herself in the same issue. That “a skilled engineer or great artist” should enjoy superior living conditions, she argued, was something that would not happen in “a true Socialist State (which the U.S.S.R. is to my mind considerably short of).”

The *Leader* reported criticism of her article in a Moscow radio broadcast. The paper rejected the charge that it was “anti-Soviet” and revealed that the top official Mannin criticized for living in luxury was Litvinov, the Commissar for Foreign Affairs, whose country home she had visited during her trip. A week later, Brockway defended her in an editorial, rejecting the allegation that the paper was “giving vent to all kinds of anti-Soviet propaganda.” This was nonsense. Since Mannin’s article, the *New Leader* had included “columns extolling Russia.” Brockway insisted that “we respect Russia as a powerful Workers’ State, the greatest thing that has happened in history, strong enough to be criticised as well as acclaimed.”

The USSR might have still been a “workers’ state” at the beginning of 1936, but by the time the 1940 ILP conference met, the Soviet government had become, in the words of a NAC motion attacking the Russian invasion of Finland, “the Stalinist regime.” Yet a residual belief in the USSR remained for many. In the preface to the postwar (1947) edition of *Inside the Left,* Brockway would deny being “unsympathetic to Russia.” Though a critic of “the part it has played in international affairs and its repression of liberty at home,” he had “never lost sight of the overriding consideration that private Capitalism has been ended there.” His “criticism of Russia’s foreign policy and its denial of liberty” were, he went on, “if anything, stronger now than when this book was written.” However, reflecting a time when the beginning of the Cold War, as it is seen today, seemed all too likely to result in a “hot” one in the near future, he added,

I feel that the supremely important duty of Socialists today, both as a matter of justice and for the sake of the peace of the world, is to retain an objective international attitude towards the power-politics struggle which threatens to bring war again, and not allow themselves to accept...
without unprejudiced examination the case against Russia which the politicians, the press and the wireless broadcasts are piling up.  

Perhaps the best illustration of the still starkly divided attitudes within the ILP towards Soviet Russia is to be found in the October 1939 edition of the new internal discussion organ, *Between Ourselves*. By this time, Stalin’s pact with Hitler had, in many ILP eyes, further discredited the standing of the USSR. Nevertheless, David Thomas, who claimed an ILP membership extending over forty years, wrote a laudatory account with the title “What Russia Means.” In the same issue, Don McGregor responded to Thomas’s article in “Russia—Reflections.” Rejecting Thomas’s idealization of the USSR, McGregor concluded: “If Russia is a ‘Socialist State’ then Marxism must find another name to define what is really meant by ‘workers’ democracy’ (which does not exist in Russia) and most of us will be pleased to renounce the label ‘Socialist.’”

By the time this edition of *Between Ourselves* appeared, the war that the ILP had warned about for so long had broken out, and, once again, the party was taking a stand against it—opposition that provoked yet a further decline in membership. In the next chapter, we return to 1935 to explore the ILP’s attempts to develop a united front both with the CPGB and with the Labour Party.