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Middle Class Recruits to Communism in the 1930s Transcript

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Middleclass Recruits to Communism in the 1930s

Professor Nicholas Deakin

In this lecture I will tell the stories of some young idealists from middle-class backgrounds who joined the CPGB in the 1930s, describe their experiences, examine their motivations and explore some of the consequences of their engagement with the party.

Until recently, these 1930s communists have been too easily dismissed as Stalin's useful idiots or as children of the bourgeoisie suffering from acute class guilt. At best, they are portrayed as blinkered and naive, foolishly adopting positions that they didn't fully understand. At worst, they were *faux durs*, childishly playing at being tough-minded revolutionary cadres. At times, the dismissal has been brutal, as some observations after the recent death of Eric Hobsbawm demonstrated. In response, Karl Miller commented that

"one of the most dismal prejudices to be encountered in Anglo-America has been its worsening failure to imagine how decent people could choose to be communists in the 1930s" (LRB 25.10.12)

Similarly, the decade in which they joined, the thirties, is habitually described in Auden's terms as low and dishonest, the "devil's decade", a "dark valley" leading inevitably to the armageddon in the second world war. The narrative arc leads inexorably downwards, leaving little space for laudable aspirations or even the positive achievements of that period - and they were considerable, as Juliet Gardiner has recently reminded us.

However, many of the justifications for dismissing this generation and their experiences are essentially cold war arguments. Their choices were wrong because they are retrospectively invalidated by our knowledge about the truth of Stalin's dictatorship and the postwar history of Soviet Communism.

A fresh look now, twenty-odd years after the end of the cold war and the demise of both the Soviet Union and the CPGB, should take us beyond these stereotypes. But it is important to stress that this exercise is not intended as an apologia - it is simply an attempt at securing a better understanding of the motivation and attitudes of a group of young people, not a post Soviet-style rehabilitation process.

The historian John Saville, himself one of the most interesting examples of the thirties generation, has commented that 'analytical examples of the Communist experience are rare, in personal terms especially'. Fortunately, (and largely through the diligence of Kevin Morgan and his Manchester colleagues) there is now quite a wide range of accounts to draw upon. The cases that I will present are not in any proper sense fully representative; they have been chosen mainly on the basis of personal connexions, not as a social scientific sample. In making my choices, I have deliberately avoided some of the best known celebrity cases; and I do not intend to engage with espionage, actual or imagined. What I hope as far as possible to do is give the individuals concerned their own voices.

Context for the Thirties

My cast of young recruits to communism, though all broadly middle class, came from diverse backgrounds: the chief rabbi's twelfth child (Jack Gaster), the literary critic's daughter (Maire Lynd); the adopted son of the pioneer sexologist (Francois Lafitte); the son of the developer of the Spassky copper mine (Richard Clark) and the daughter of a singer from Edinburgh (Mary McIntosh); the dead war hero's child (Charles Madge); the High Commissioner's son (Bernard Floud) and the boy who fell off his motor bike (Malcolm MacEwen). But they all had in common formative experiences that touched their whole generation.

In particular, there was the First World War - the Great War to contemporaries. This cast a heavy shadow over the following decades, even in the victor nations. In one of them, Britain, the material sacrifices made to secure victory left a substantial impact on the national economy; but the human cost of the war in terms of deaths and injuries was perhaps the most important legacy. The young men and women of the early thirties did not themselves experience war directly, but their fathers, their uncles and often their elder brothers had done so and many of them had died or been permanently affected, physically or mentally. Other consequences were less immediate but equally significant - the war widows left to bring up children alone, other young women who would never find a partner.

Postwar Britain became a country in which the cult of mourning was all-pervasive, from the plaques in school halls, through the village memorials, banners laid up in cathedrals to the Cenotaph in Whitehall: all forming part of the commemorations on Armistice day, the focus both for grief but also of rejection of militarism and its consequences. The lessons taught by the war poets, particularly Wilfred Owen, on the futility of war, were reinforced by the runaway success at the end of the twenties of R.C. Sherriff's play, *Journey's End*, which caught a national mood with its poignant account of ordeal, sacrifice and pervasive sense of loss. The determination that there would be no repetition of the slaughter in the trenches ran through all social classes, from the monarch downwards. At the time of the Abyssinian crisis in 1935 George V told his former Prime Minister Lloyd George that he would 'go to Trafalgar Square and wave a Red Flag myself' in protest if there were any question of war.

More practical ways of avoiding a resumption of war in Europe and beyond were based on the machinery created as part of the postwar settlement, most conspicuously the League of Nations but also a major sequence of diplomatic negotiations designed to secure treaty commitments to significant reduction in the amounts of armaments held by major powers.

The economic depression that swept across the world at the end of the twenties proved fatal to these hopes. In Germany the impact of the depression fatally undermined the fragile Weimar republic and opened the door to Hitler and his demagogic and antisemitic National Socialism, committed to reversing the Versailles settlement and making his intentions abundantly clear, in mass demonstrations and on the streets.

The League of Nations was confronted with a series of progressively stronger challenges to its authority, beginning with Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931 - and failed all of them. Negotiations on reduction of armaments faltered in the face of the new *realpolitik*.

The economic effects in Britain of the depression were also substantial and the political outcome was dramatic. The second Labour Government fell in 1931 and was replaced by an all-party National Government. That government then won a general election in which the Labour Party lost almost all its leading figures and proceeded to introduce a programme of drastic cuts in public expenditure.

The social and economic consequences of the crisis were felt unevenly across the country and between classes. Many middle-class households were shielded to a considerable extent during the thirties from the full impact of the depression, being protected by the stability of much white-collar employment and the rapid expansion during the thirties of house ownership. Their experience contrasted sharply with that of the working classes outside London and the South-East. The collapse of manufacturing industry across South Wales, the Midlands, the North East and central Scotland resulted in endemic unemployment and acute poverty, with a crisis in public health. The extent of accessible relief was limited and still further restricted when cuts in government expenditure on social welfare led to the introduction in 1931 of the much-hated Means Test.

The middle class young, separately educated and living in single class suburbs or rural communities with their traditional hierarchies saw all this human misery at one remove, if at all - though the more prosperous still had servants, there was generally a limited amount of personal contact across classes. This division was acutely felt by young idealists; as one of them subsequently put it:

"I had no understanding of working class people. Millions of victims of capitalist oppression did exist, for sure, but I did not know any of them; or at least I did not know any of them well enough to understand how they felt. The working class was an abstraction, a trump card in political debate." (Mayhew).

Their experience was quite unlike that of their fathers and older brothers who had encountered their fellow countrymen in the trenches and were often marked for life by that experience. Nevertheless some awareness of the realities of life outside the Home Counties and the impact of mass unemployment did penetrate, becoming increasingly visible through demonstrations involving the unemployed, protesting vigorously about lack of work and the injustices of the Means Test. An inchoate sense developed that 'something needed to be done'. Where should the young turn for an answer?

The initial responses of the small group that I am describing - anxiety, concern, desire to do things better - were similar to those of many of their contemporaries.

But where they were not typical was in the choice that they made, to join the Communist party. They did so despite the fact that, contrary to some later accounts, there were several other choices open to them.

What was it that led them in this particular direction? Was there something distinctive about their personalities? The character and beliefs of their parents? Their own intellectual curiosity? Their class situation or even ethnic origins?

Or was their choice determined by circumstances - opportunities and restrictions in the educational institutions they attended, individual encounters and friendships, interests and cast of mind, even their sexual relationships?

And what do their stories have to tell us about the particular appeal of communism to this generation?

In tracing their experiences I will frame my narrative - which will necessarily be much condensed - in terms of life cycle, from family background through education and wider experiences in adolescence and after through the decision to join the party and its immediate consequences. And I will introduce individual examples as I go along.

Stages in the process

The proposition that a propensity to join "radical organizations" can be explained by the presence of pathological personality disorders was a typical product of the cold war literature. As far as Britain is concerned this theory was conclusively rebutted by Kenneth Newton's pioneering study of British communism. This theme was revisited by Jennifer Hart in her recklessly frank autobiography, in which she convincingly dismisses any such explanation of her own decision to join the party.

There are slightly more plausible explanations on offer around the dynamics of the family, specifically relations with the dominant parent - usually though not invariably the father. The older generation's unwillingness to understand, let alone sympathize with the younger generation's aspirations is of course a constant theme in most post enlightenment societies and provided the motif for many a *bildungsroman*. In his preface to the biography of Donald Maclean, Noel Annan makes pretentious reference to the Priesthood of Nemi, where each priestly generation is in turn symbolically slain by its successor. Kingsley Amis is more forthright - his communism was simply a "banal" rebellion against his father.

However, in the small group I'm following, good - if not always close and affectionate - relationships with parents is the common pattern - parents who often have "liberal" views themselves and are anxious to understand what is driving their children further to the left.

So in these cases, at least, the decision to commit to communism needs further explanation - possibly in the search for a credible faith, another feature of many adolescences, which could take conventional religious form but might then be diverted into new channels when that religion came to seem inadequate or even oppressive.

But for the decision made by young middle class idealists the education system is the logical next place in which to look for explanations. For them, this usually but not invariably meant public schools (progressive schools, especially for girls, provided a slightly different environment).

Young radicals at school

Rebellion against the institutions and values of public schools, as they were in the nineteen twenties, hardly needs special explanation. But one cause that attracted widespread symbolic opposition and engaged the pacifist instincts of many of the young was the requirement to undertake military training in the Officer Training Corps. Individuals took this cause up and there were some efforts to extend support for rejection across schools (as through Esmond Romilly's publication *Out of Bounds*). Individual radical teachers were also an influence in a number of schools.

But systematic attempts by pupils at working up alternative approaches, rather than simply another version of youthful nay-saying or small "cells" of self-proclaimed communists, seem to have been quite rare, compared with what was happening in continental Europe in lycées and gymnasia.

The most spectacular exception that I have found was Westminster School. This school was unusual at the time (and indeed subsequently) in the extent to which students there were open to the outside world, being located in the centre of London and with direct links into the world of politics. It was a standard feature of a pupil's experience there to be addressed at school societies by leading politicians, whose views were often subjected to critical examination and debate. A lively culture of discussion - including a very active League of Nations youth group - existed within the school.

Against this background, it is less surprising that in 1936 a group of students in the scholars' house, with the encouragement of a number of teachers, should have sought and obtained permission to establish a political society with the explicit aim of producing a manifesto on current world issues to which the adherence of fellow pupils would be sought. This was to be reinforced by a programme of regular meetings and publications explaining the different items in the manifesto. This group was called (with the headmaster's grudging consent) the United Front of Popular Forces ("Uffpuff"). The group managed a year's lively existence and then as these things do faded away, leaving behind impressive evidence of the seriousness of the attempts made to communicate advanced political ideas and secure commitment to them.

Westminster pupils were also able to use their freedom to move about London to attend political demonstrations that were becoming an increasingly common feature of the capital. School magazines report attendance at a number of rallies for example, a big CPGB meeting in Trafalgar Square and the 1936 May Day rally addressed by the party's leader Harry Pollitt (described as 'most stirring and extremely lucid'). Jack Gaster, a recent convert to the communist party from the ILP, spoke at the first and 'won the sympathy of the crowd with a few well chosen wisecracks at the expense of the National government'.

The students were sufficiently impressed by these experiences to attempt to invite Harry Pollitt to speak at the school - but liberalism could not stretch that far (although UffPuff sent their manifesto to him and received an encouraging response).

Other schools also had distinctive qualities that helped to shape the views of their would-be radical pupils. The biographer of the Communist poet, Randall Swingler, described him as a high caste Wykehamist in flight from his education and class but retaining that schools's sense of public service. Swingler is not the only Wykehamist we shall encounter - Charles Madge is described by his then wife, Kathleen Raine, as being the centre of a coterie of left-wing Wykehamists. Another of the same tribe was Thomas Hodgkin, whose entertaining verse autobiography *Don Tomas* (alas, cut off by his death before completion) lovingly lists his school contemporaries (Swingler among them) and their congenial views. Frank Thompson, platonic lover of Iris Murdoch, who recruited him into the party, also saw himself as a member of an elite, although he thought that 'the culture one imbibed at Winchester was too nostalgic .. one fell in love with the beauty of the past'. This despite being taught by a left wing teacher, who hung up a map of the Spanish civil war in the classroom and taught 'Russian, German and current affairs'.

Other schools stand out as having a culture which was sympathetic to more radical views. Gresham's, the school attended by W.H.Auden, Bernard Floud and his brother Peter (and James Klugmann) was a place that formally rejected jingo patriotism and was prepared to tolerate reformist, even socialist ideas.

Girls' day schools in London were also an environment in which radical views could be shared and openly expressed. Their pupils were 'often already thoughtful, not uncomprehending of the issues of the day' (Jenifer Hart) and frequently developed a strong interest in public affairs (Mary McIntosh). Some of them were subsequently anxious to rebut the patronising suggestion that they were recruited into the party not of their own volition but merely by following their boyfriends.

Meanwhile, there were other ways of learning about political developments abroad, through formal links between public schools in England and those in continental Europe or informally through trips to Germany, in particular holidays with parents and friends or to learn the language.

The most spectacular of these possibilities was a trip to the USSR. To take a Westminster example again - the school magazine (December 1932) contains an account of one David Hubback's trip on the Soviet ship *Kooperatia*. His verdict was cautiously favourable - "a land of hope, if not yet of glory".

The specific fascination with the USSR blended with a more general russophilia - and in particular a taste for Russian literature. This could be reinforced by attendance at the white Russian exile Prince Dmitri Mirsky's London University courses. However, in 1929 the Prince defected to Marxism and began to deploy a very different sort of analytical approach. One of those who attended his subsequent lectures was Francois Lafitte.

Lafitte was also involved directly while in Germany before going up to Oxford in 1932, in active resistance to Nazism in the street (as Eric Hobsbawm was, more dramatically).

Other radical schoolboys found an outlet in expressing support for the Bulgarian communist Dimitrov at the Reichstag Fire trial or in concern about the suppression of the Social Democrats in Vienna and clandestine activity taken to help them out (as described in an article in the Westminster School magazine strikingly entitled 'Austro-Marxismus').

There was another avenue for conversion - simple intellectual curiosity leading to an individual's own choice to read the Marxist classics and reflect upon them (Malcolm MacEwen - though his was a special case).

But in most cases the moment of choice came in higher education - which for this group means Oxford, Cambridge or possibly LSE. However, as Donald Maclean's biographer comments, 'it is easy to overlook how many undergraduates reached University ripe for recruitment' (to the CP) - and also the strength of feeling associated with their experiences at school. Commenting in the mid-30s on this strong reaction against their public schools, the Oxford student magazine *Isis* observed..

'It is in the interests of Conservatism that the public schools be destroyed before they turn loose too many bitter young Socialists and Communists. If the latter wish to make the country a Communist state, they really should insist that everyone is sent to a public school.' (Mayhew).

University Options

From 1933 onwards, new undergraduates who came up to the two oldest English universities or LSE and wished to take some part in radical activities would find a whole range of possibilities.

Not all of those attracted to progressive politics were the children of established middle class intelligentsia- the "gifted youth" now most often referred to - some were the first generation of their family in higher education.

In Cambridge, the student left were united in a single grouping, the Cambridge University Socialist Club, with a core communist group, of which David Haden Guest was principal mover. They worked under the patronage of a small number of dons, as members of the party cell whose origins can be traced to a meeting in 1931 of the Heretics Club addressed by Comrade-Prince Dmitri Mirsky. (Frances Cornford, reporting to her son John who could not be there, described him as believing in Communism "like a Byzantine saint", with a wonderful smile).

In Oxford (which is my main focus because most of my group went there) there was a wider range of possibilities in the early thirties:

First, the October Club, founded in 1931 by an American student, Frank Meyer and his friend Dick Freeman -- effectively the nucleus of the communist presence - though there had been a few individual members earlier. The decision by Meyer and Freeman to take their small group formally into the party was triggered off by a visit to the Club by the briefly ubiquitous Mirsky (now unequivocally Comrade).

Then a University Labour Club, shortly to be revived by a Canadian, David Lewis, after going into sharp decline after the traumatic fall of Labour Government in 1931.

A vigorous student Liberal grouping, a strong League of Nations union and associated peace groupings, intent on promoting the Peace Ballot and the Peace Pledge Union.

Or on the other side, the fascists, initially quite strong in the University - cultivated by Mosley personally and by his movement - first the New Party and subsequently as the British Union of Fascists.

And outside the explicitly political arena but a very active contender for the recruitment of the unattached, was the evangelical Christian "Oxford Group" launched by Frank Buchman - modelling itself partly on twentieth century ideas about organised political action - propaganda, cells of believers, testimony of the converted. As its name implies, his movement was explicitly designed to appeal to

university students as the potential leaders of tomorrow.

In the early thirties, the story is partly of uneasy relations between the Labour Club and other left wing groupings but in December 1935 the club decided to sanction joint membership with the October Club and the way was now formally open to joint working with the communists.

To grasp the full implications of this development we need to understand the nature of the CPGB at this time.

The CPGB in the Thirties.

At the beginning of the 1930s the Communist party (properly the Communist Party of Great Britain: *British section of the Communist International*) had been very small indeed, with around 2,500 members and locked into a fierce struggle to establish itself as the authentic party of the British working class, in opposition to the Labour party and the existing trades union movement. This involved denunciations of the Labour party as complicit in capitalist oppression of the workers and an attempt to create rival unions in key industries - the "Minority Movement". The form of the struggle and the objective - an attempt to create a British form of Bolshevism - was dictated by the line taken by the Comintern, based in Moscow and requiring implementation by national member parties. This policy was known as "class against class".

The link with Moscow was explicit and it was both an asset and a handicap. It enabled the party to bask in the reflected glory of a connexion with the great Soviet experiment - "actually existing socialism"; but it allowed its critics to write off the party as an agent of a foreign power, obedient to a party line set abroad and operating with the aid of Red Gold.

The party at this stage was a classic Marxist-Leninist vanguard party of the industrial working class, the cadres formed in struggle and often trained at the Lenin School in Moscow. The party was essentially factory-based and no attempt had been made to extend the class base of the membership; although a few middle class members did join at this period, most did not remain.

This situation changed. The coming to power of the Nazis in 1933 clearly demonstrated the folly of the division between Social Democrats and Communists that had allowed them to do so. The Reichstag fire trial in the following year, with the Bulgarian Communist Georgi Dimitrov's epic defiance of the Nazi regime from the dock, and the suppression of the Austrian Social Democrats in Vienna underlined the urgency of organizing effective resistance to the dictatorships. The Italian invasion of Abyssinia exposed the inability of the League to implement even the modest sanctions that had been agreed as an attempt to deter Mussolini's aggression. The USSR came in from the international cold by joining the League of Nations in 1934 (and Nazi Germany left). And the Comintern decreed the end of the "class against class" policy (1935), now instructing member parties instead to form alliances of all left wing parties against Fascism.

In the USSR itself, the apparent success of the Five Year Plans was attracting a series of foreign visitors, most of them eager to be convinced that Soviet planning had the answer to the problems of unemployment and industrial modernization which capitalism had failed to provide.

The extent of communist engagement in successive political developments in Britain grew: Oswald Mosley's campaigns after he shed his respectable supporters and embraced anti-semitism - notoriously, at his Olympia rally in 1934 - provided the battleground for his left-wing opponents. More positively, unemployment and hunger marches organized by the National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM) - a membership body led by the communist Wal Hannington - helped to dramatise the extent of unemployment, which had reached three million by 1934, and the conditions of life on the dole and the impact on public health.

And the Communist party itself, released from the constraints of the "class against class" policy, began the process of building alliances on the left by opening negotiations with the ILP, until recently reviled as "social fascists" - though the Labour party, unimpressed by the change of line, declined to engage in these discussions.

So the CPGB now positively welcomed the prospect of recruiting young middle class members. As Willie Gallacher, shortly to become the party's only MP, put it when addressing undergraduates in Cambridge in 1934:

We want people who are capable, who are good scientists, historians and teachers. It doesn't follow at all that you will be good workers. We need you as you are: if you have a vocation it is pointless to run away to factories. One or two of you may become full-time revolutionaries but this is a thing that only a few of you will be able to do. We want you to study and become good students'.

The Left in Oxford

The range of activity expected of Oxford University Labour Club members, as demonstrated in the Club's bulletins from the mid 1930s (Richard Clark), now broadens and deepens. They include

Anti-war activities. The once notorious "King and Country" resolution of 1933 was a one-off without the wider implications later attributed to it. But action becomes more urgent after 1935 and the demonstrable failure of the League to find means of dealing with military aggression (Gaster). This is the point at which the once-famous Peace Ballot was launched, which invited respondents to declare their views on the League, on reduction of armaments and national air forces by consent and about the response to aggressors - either economic sanctions or in the last resort military measures. On all but the last item there were thumping majorities for the anti-war view. On the back of which the charismatic clergyman Dick Sheppard, launched his Peace Pledge Union, in which individuals were invited to send pledge cards with the words: "I renounce war and never again, directly, or indirectly, will I support or sanction another". Membership nationally reached six figures by the end of 1936.

Responding to the hunger marches. Their impact in both Universities of their arrival was immediate and substantial - they provided visible evidence of the consequences of government policies towards the 'distressed areas' and for some the human contact previously lacking (Madge). This leads on to the search for practical means of support for the unemployed - like joint summer camps (Hart).

Joint working with the labour movement in Oxford City. Examples were the successful strike at the Pressed Steel factory (masterminded by Abe "Firestone" Lazarus); the attempt to tear down the "Cutteslowe Walls" dividing local authority from privately-owned housing (1935). This links to

Anti-fascist action - repelling Mosley's attempts to secure a base for his movement in Oxford (effectively achieved by 1936) and assisting in confrontations elsewhere

Development of popular front activities, stimulated by the electoral successes of the French *Front Populaire* and the Popular Front in Spain;

In all this, the role of John Cornford as a communist student organiser was important. He inherited from Frank Meyer, who mentored him before being deported in 1934, the task of making cross-University links, achieving a union between the communist-led Federation of Student Societies and the University Labour Federation, and so providing a common platform for student campaigns.

But one particular cause now comes to dominate:

Spain

The military revolt against the Spanish Republic in 1936 marks a turning point in more ways than one. The involvement on the side of the rebels of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, whose military and logistic support was indispensable to their early successes was only partly counterbalanced by the engagement of the USSR on the side of the republic.

The Comintern's decision to create an International Brigade of foreign volunteers offered a route to direct involvement in the struggle. In Britain, the Communist party took the lead in organising recruitment and passage of recruits through France to the fighting. The first contingents of the Brigade arrived in Madrid in time to take part in the defence of the capital against Franco's assault and the successful resistance around the city's University which gave birth to the slogan: '*No pasaran!*'

Meanwhile, the democracies, including the Popular Front government recently elected in France, committed themselves to a policy of non intervention which purported (but failed) to limit the supplies of military equipment and "volunteers" to both sides. In this policy, the National Government in Britain initially had the support of the Labour Party.

From the perspective of the young, battle lines now appeared to be clearly drawn - fascism should and could be stopped and the place to do so was Spain. The issue was clearly summed up in the Spanish Republic's appeal for outside help - today us, tomorrow, you.

Communists were already prominent on the Republican side in the defence of Madrid and subsequently formed the overwhelming majority of recruits from Britain to the International Brigade.

The alternative of collective security through the League of Nations - or by joint action by the democracies - now appeared to be incapable of providing an effective response to aggression. The non-intervention policy was a farce, allowing the rebels ready access to help from their allies, the right wing dictatorships, but blocking assistance to the legitimate government.

Events in Spain also presented a crisis for pacifists - there were many defections of socialist pacifists who now regarded the suppression of Franco's rebellion as a uniquely just cause for which it was right to fight.

Generally, the appeal of communism was greatly enhanced. As the International Brigades were drawn into a series of desperate confrontations with Franco's regular troops and his Italian allies the list of the martyred dead grew rapidly longer. Prominent among them were some of the high profile middle-class recruits to the party. And a whole series of ancillary activities in support of the Republic, beginning with Medical Aid for Spain, were eagerly promoted.

Of course the situation in Spain was not quite as clearcut as contemporaries believed. But the image of Spain, the good cause to which all should commit themselves without reservation, dominated much debate on the left over the rest of the decade. Writers and poets in particular felt called upon to make their contribution. As one of them (Louis MacNiece) put it: 'in Spain our blunt ideals would find their whetstone'.

Choosing Communism

All these developments now seemed to provide clear answers to the question: from all the options on offer, why choose Communism?

Spain was the strongest card in the pack for those seeking to recruit newcomers to communism. But there were others.

The decision could take the form of a spontaneous "conversion" experience, instant or overnight. (This is often compared to religious conversion, though others reject this parallel). Or, a matter of fact conclusion, based on considering the evidence, reading and reflection either over time or in one spontaneous leap, when everything that was previously confusing now falls into one logical and consistent pattern (Koestler, Bernal).

Or it might stem from considering the alternatives and finding them unsatisfactory. The failure of the capitalist system and the need for fundamental change and replacement by a new economic and social order was accepted across a wide spectrum of opinion. The Labour Party was frequently seen as incapable of achieving the radical changes that would be required.

In choosing an alternative, there was a perception of the CPGB as the wave of the future and individual communists as serious people, tough, committed, well informed, able to get things done (as in Cecil Day-Lewis's much mocked verse about the Communists' unique virtues).

For the "outsiders" - joining the Party could be attractive as means of moving towards acceptance in wider society, though this may have been particularly true for Jewish and Irish working-class members.

For feminist recruits: the Party could be seen as a means of addressing the frustrations of young middle-class women up against institutional discrimination in some traditional professions (medicine, teaching, the civil service).

Another factor might be the influence of lovers (especially working class partners, heterosexual and gay)

Or a mixture of all these reasons..and the eternal impulse of the young to throw the mighty down and smash the existing system: as one of them subsequently put it, the objective was that 'inequality, injustice, imperialism and war were all to be abolished' (Mayhew).

And it could be the outcome of courtship by Party branches and their "fishermen", in Universities and professional groupings. Philip Toynbee gives a vivid account of that process in his memoir *Friends Apart*. Gaster family papers show such courtships at work in exchanges between Maire Lynd and Michael Abercrombie. In his letters, he coaxes her gently towards closer involvement in party activities - only about three hours per week but useful training and 'constructed for intellectuals' - supervises her reading and urges her to apply for membership as soon as she feels herself to be 'a convinced communist'. When she does, he turns her over to Francois Lafitte as the senior party organiser, with a word of caution about not being put off by his manner.

Finally, there could be the shock of an individual event - the arrival of hunger marchers, an encounter with a working-class party activist, a death in Spain - to clinch the decision to "come over".

And the party itself was willing to welcome new recruits from a wide range of backgrounds; Harry Pollitt, speaking in 1937 at the Albert Hall, assured his audience that 'we have no contemptuous attitude towards the middle class and the professional people. We believe that unless we can win them to the side of the working class both they and ourselves will pay the same price as has already been paid in Germany, in Austria and in Italy'. The Central Committee's report to the party's fourteenth Congress in the same year referred to the rapid increase in party numbers and commented hopefully that 'many students and people connected with the professions have joined us, believing that only through the advancement of the aims of the Communist Party can they help towards the development of the new Socialist society.'

Left-wing student action

Spain continued to be a main focus for student activity - not just campaigning to change National Government policy on non-intervention but medical aid and eventually helping refugees (like Basque children being cared for by young dons' wives).

Political action now stressed the importance of a popular front - after Munich, there was a practical example in the 1938 Oxford by-election in the (not entirely voluntary) withdrawal of the Labour candidate in favour of an independent progressive, Lindsay.

Other favoured activities for progressive undergraduates included:

* Visits to USSR (Mayhew). Trips with Intourist were an increasingly common experience for young enthusiasts (VOKS for grander visitors). Not all these journeys had happy outcomes, from the hosts' point of view - there was scepticism about political motivation and revulsion from the catering and sanitary arrangements in the workers' state. But among those who went also some willingness to regard these as the teething problems of a new society and celebrate its achievements - both practical, like the White Sea Canal (*actually built by slave labour*), and philosophical, like the introduction of the 1936 Soviet constitution (*never actually implemented*).

* An emphasis on exploring ways to expose exploitation in the Empire and more particularly in India; recruiting Indian and Ceylonese students as party members.

* Work with the increasing numbers of refugees from Nazi Germany and eventually also Austria and Czechoslovakia.

For those coming up after 1936 there was, for some, a sense of impending doom - the Rhineland, Spain, Munich.. a "drum beat of war"? But this feeling does not seem to have been universal.

It is also important not to overemphasize the political dimension - this may have been all absorbing for many but by no means for all. Yet membership of OU Labour Club by 1938 was impressive - a fifth of all students belong. And CPGB student members were encouraged to set to work on penetrating other organizations. Communists as office holders in the OULC were semi-legitimate; but positions were sought out in other bodies too, especially anti-war groups, like League of Nations youth movement.

And then there was the academic dimension. Denis Healey subsequently commented that whereas previously any communists at University.. were very sectarian, got drunk, wore beards and did not worry about examinations' now, especially after the introduction of the Popular Front policy, 'communists started shaving, tried to avoid being drunk in public, worked for first class degrees and played down their Marxist-Leninism'. (*Healey, p. 35*) But not necessarily. Some Communists graduated with poor degrees, even a pass degree or no degree at all - last two both became professors.

By the end of the thirties, there was much talk of "fashionable and popular red Oxford" - epitomized by Frank Thompson (another Wykehamist) and the Murdoch entourage. These communists were by no means swots, dullards or puritans. Rather, there seems to have been a standing invitation to the dance.

Life after joining the party

Becoming a comrade meant joining a clerisy, a sacred band. As condition of entry, the newcomer was committed to embarking on serious political (re)education, studying classic texts and learning how to apply Marxist principles. It meant taking on specific tasks as part of the Party's political work - meetings, canvassing, local campaigns, chalking, selling the *Daily Worker*.

There were special assignments involving infiltration of existing organisations - youth and local branches of other political parties, peace organisations, professional bodies and trades union branches. It meant giving priority to the Party over the personal. Entering a small world but also becoming part of an international movement centered on the USSR ("the socialist sixth of the world"), unconditional support for which was a fundamental principle of membership.

Negatively, it sometimes meant cutting off from friends and family who won't tolerate the degree of commitment required. It also meant confronting the hostility of political opponents, including perhaps particularly those elsewhere on the Left. In subsequent accounts Orwell is frequently mentioned as an example; and there was increasingly frenetic hostility to "Trotskyite deviations" mandated from Moscow. And it could also mean mockery (cf Cyril Connolly *Where Engels fear to Tread*).

Comradeship in practice meant close identification with the working class and a fundamental change in attitudes and behaviour. This extends to name changes - more demotic first names, no more Ruperts, Evelyns, Gabriels or Francois. Sometimes there was an attempt at change of accents. Making practical links with the rapidly growing Party presence in the Unions, confirming that this is a Party of the working class, to which middle class recruits now owe their primary loyalty.

It may also mean casual sexual relations "within the Party" (Hyde, Amis, Toynbee). The militant's own family can become of secondary importance

The individual becomes "of no importance", but at the same time there are individual leaders who are of fundamental significance - Stalin, increasingly, as the thirties pass, Dimitrov as head of the Comintern, but also the CPGB's own leadership, especially Pollitt.

Yet the CPGB differed in one important respect from almost all the other members of the Comintern. The Party was subject to frequent criticism and members often had to face much personal pressure. But before the outbreak of war, the party never experienced the kind of active persecution that other Communist parties had to undergo. Individual communists were often accepted as potential allies, admired for their energy and willingness to take on uncongenial tasks, and able to lead a social and professional life that extended outside the party's own world (Newton, Morgan).

Some of this was reflected in the experiences of those who had enlisted in the party at University earlier in the decade and had now gone out into the wider world.

Aftermaths

Some of those who had committed themselves fully to communism initially saw their own future strictly in terms of party work ("*full time revolutionaries*").

This might involve being directly employed by the CPGB in organizational work - working with the membership of local branches under the direction of the regional party apparatus.

Two of our subjects followed this path. After going down in 1935 Francois Lafitte (now as "Frank") was a party organiser in East London and in October 1936 it was his responsibility to communicate the London District Committee's decision not to oppose Mosley's march through the area but instead to concentrate on a youth rally for Spain in Trafalgar Square. The written instructions that he gave Joe Jacobs of the Stepney party ("If Mosley attempts to march, let him. Don't attempt disorder") were swiftly overturned by the action taken by local activists and the District apparatus accepted the inevitable. The Battle of Cable Street then took place and the image of unswerving

communist resistance to fascism, so dear to the party in later years, was born. (And Francois abandoned the work for which he himself believed he was entirely unsuited). The other was Malcolm MacEwen in Newcastle - his experience there was not so dramatic but he also concluded that he was clearly not up to the task. His preferred path was through journalism and specifically the *Daily Worker*.

Others became active members of local party groups (M. Lynd/Gaster). The Marylebone branch of the party had a vigorous existence, campaigning for tenants' rights, seeking unsuccessfully to promote joint activities with the local Labour party and raising funds for medical aid for Spain. We have a flickering portrait of their public activities from Special Branch surveillance reports which tell us that when the Branch celebrated their first five years "songs of a communistic and satirical character" were sung.

Others worked as student organisers - first nationally and then internationally (Klugmann; Floud) helped build up anti-war groups (Madge) or worked with refugees. The League of Nations Union proved to be fertile ground for penetration by young communists.

Particular professional groups provided a sympathetic environment for the communist recruits - for example, the natural sciences (Bernal). Many young scientists found the Soviet claims to have evolved in scientific socialism a means of rationally ordering society persuasive (Levy) and the apparent success of the Soviet Union in putting scientific discoveries to work for the common good, not profit, attractive (Haldane). The lab frequently became a recruitment zone (Nunn May).

The image of the Soviet Union as being in the vanguard of modernism and experiment in the arts and sciences was also potentially attractive. Soviet experiments in architecture were widely admired in that profession and in the currently fashionable planning movement. Engineering - the state's massive construction schemes - and aeronautics - the heroic deeds of Soviet aeronauts - were also the subject of much successful propaganda by the regime.

In the arts, there was admiration for the constructivists but particularly for Soviet cinema (especially documentaries recounting Soviet achievements, much shown at film clubs) and photography with a social purpose (Tudor Hart). Here, too, there was increased exposure to the eloquent and persuasive political emigres from Europe.

The widely remarked upon crisis in public health in the depression provided ample grounds for young medical students to consider alternative approaches (Doll), and there was also the development of psychoanalysis as a profession, reinforced by the Hitler exiles.

In the social sciences there were pioneering social investigations, much enhanced by the contribution of exiles - Jahoda, Durant, Kuczynski - left wing though not open party members. There was the creation of Mass Observation and Charles Madge's attempt to create a synthesis of his Marxism and Tom Harrison's applied social anthropology.

The creation of the Left Book Club in 1936 on the initiative of Victor Gollancz provided a ready source of political information and analysis, intended to contribute, as the club's circular put it, to the 'terribly urgent struggle for World Peace & a better social & economic order & against fascism'. Texts were selected monthly by a small group with a strong communist presence and discussed in the groups that formed, semi-spontaneously, to debate the issues, which were further explored in the Club's own publication, *Left News*. Most often cited were John Strachey's sequence of publications, from *The Coming Struggle for Power* onwards and popularisations of Marxist theory (Emile Burns, Herman Levy). Once, famously, George Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier* - issued with a carping preface by Gollancz himself - but not, notoriously, his *Homage to Catalonia*.

And then there was Literature. Michael Roberts (himself a former communist) produced *New Country* (1933), an anthology of new work by young poets and writers of fiction - among them Day Lewis, Auden, Isherwood, Edward Upward and Stephen Spender - and Madge. In his contribution, "Letter to a young revolutionary", Day Lewis called for 'An absolute belief in revolution as the way to, and the form of, new life. This faith may come as an instantaneous flash; or a harvest; or a coral reef. But whether it grow quickly or slowly, it must come. You must have a conversion'. And he adds 'you might as well know that a few of us poets, in our capacity of receiving stations, do detect the vibrations of new life in Communism'. Madge in his "Letter to the Intelligentsia" was brisker:

'Lenin, would you were living at this hour:
England has need of you, of the cold voice
That spoke beyond Time's passions, that expelled
All the half treasons of the mind in doubt.'

The cracks in the picture

But there were grounds for doubt - some of them good ones.

As early as 1933, there was the trial of British engineers from Metro-Vickers, charged with sabotage and convicted on flimsy evidence.

Stalin's suppression of the Kulaks and the mass starvation that followed was known at the time, if dismissed as hostile propaganda.

Then from 1936 the more celebrated trials, in Moscow, of the Old Bolsheviks and their confessions in court - which became increasingly hard for many independent observers to credit (though some did).

The impact of the purges and consignment of dissenters to the gulag, where among millions of others Prince-Comrade Mirsky and other former comrades known to the CPGB perished.

The increasingly virulent assault on "Trotskyism" and its alleged manifestations - in Britain the ILP, in Spain the POUM - to which the CPGB as a loyal member of the Comintern fully subscribed.

And even after Munich (1938), the CPGB was still equivocating about rearmament, opposing conscription and less than clear about what the party's position should be if war did break out (Morgan). Would it be an imperialist one waged by a British government unworthy of support, or did the party's often proclaimed duty to fight fascism take precedence, as Harry Pollitt would initially suggest?

The Nazi-Soviet pact settled that question. The change of line laid down from Moscow - that the war was indeed imperialist and to be resisted - initially confused the party and divided this small group. But then the CPGB obediently swung behind the Comintern decision and many of them also accepted it. (Hobsbawm, Russell, Saville)

However, I don't propose to follow them after 1939 - most were swept up in the war and then able after 1941 to relax into unconditional support for the USSR as Britain's now much-prized "soviet ally".

In Summary.

At one extreme the CPGB was a "bed and breakfast" party - membership was brief and engagement with party activities a gesture not sustained, although the consequences in later life could be serious.

Some recruits found the level of commitment required was too great. Others encountered disapproval in their professional milieu and

ceased to be active. Personal circumstances changed and the primary loyalty to the Party couldn't be sustained.

But others remained party members, if in some cases inactive ones, right up to the demise of the CPGB in 1991.

Returning to the questions I asked at the beginning, the personal histories I've briefly sketched don't suggest that this small group stand out initially from their contemporaries in any very significant way - not in their characters, their relations with their families or their material circumstances or class situations. They shared many of the concerns and preoccupations of those politically aware young people at this period who wanted to do something about the problems their generation faced.

Rather, their decision to take the step of joining the CPGB, which distinguished them from the rest of their age group, was often driven by circumstance - the educational institutions they attended, their teachers, their fellow pupils; or experiencing fascism at first hand - in Nazi Germany, Austria and later Spain. And then there were individual encounters - personal friendships, meetings with plausible recruiters and sometimes sexual relationships.

To those who took this step it often seemed a natural thing to do: the reasoning appeared quite straightforward. As a member of the MI5 staff whose task was to explain the prevalence of party members in this age group commented in an internal minute:

'the economic depression at home and the rise of fascism in Germany gave the communist movement a powerful attraction for many of the brighter undergraduates of the day (28.11.51).

But there were, of course, also strong reasons for not taking that step and most of their contemporaries did not, though sometimes not without hesitation.

In the next session, in a week's time, I will address some of the issues arising from today's narrative and with the help of the distinguished panel that has been assembled try to answer some of the questions often asked about this group and some of the wider political implications of their engagement with communism .