Reviews

End of an era

The period 1929 to the early '40s, the subject of this book, was in many ways the end of an era and the beginning of a new one.

The USA had become the dominant force in the capitalist world; the Russian Revolution had established a new social and political order that challenged the hegemony of capitalism; and the conflicting values of the two societies came into sharp focus with the capitalist economic crisis of the 1930s, “The Great Depression”.

The system of economic imperialism by which a few European countries controlled colonies and dependencies in the “undeveloped” or “developing” world was under challenge through liberation movements in India, China and elsewhere in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

With the economic crisis, the contradictions in capitalism were sharply revealed, and a new phenomenon appeared, fascism, which condemned liberalism, socialism and independent trade unionism, established regimes of authoritarian rule, extolled militarism and began preparing for a new war to redivide the world.

With the rise of fascism, democracy as a political and social system came under challenge. Traditional values and loyalties changed. The more reactionary elements in society, especially in the ruling classes, saw in fascism a means of controlling or even destroying democratic institutions, such as trade unions, which appeared to threaten their monopoly of power.

On the other hand, socialists claimed that a genuinely socialist society would expand democracy by placing control of the means of production in the hands of the actual producers, not of an exploitative or leisure class.

As Ralph Gibson’s book effectively demonstrates, loyalty to fascism as a system, or sympathy with its aims, led to the undermining of democracy and even the betrayal of one’s country by following policies that led to its conquest by foreign powers. France is an obvious example, and England narrowly escaped the same fate when a division in the ruling classes brought Churchill to power in place of Chamberlain. That Chamberlain’s view remained unchanged is demonstrated by his proposal to cabinet after Dunkirk that Britain should capitulate to Hitler with Mussolini as mediator (p.374).

This book is a blockbuster. In 389 pages of concise print, It deals with all the main issues of the period. It is a scholarly work, thoroughly documented by a man who, in his twenties, turned his back on a promising academic career to spend the next fifty years as a Communist Party activist, organiser, writer and political leader.

The book has three central themes: the effect of the economic crisis of the 1930s on world politics and on the lives of the people of the world; the role of the Soviet Union and of the communists in the capitalist countries in building popular fronts in opposition to fascism and war; an historical analysis of the Communist

Reviewed by Bill Gollan
The start of the 1933 May Day march, and Tom Wright, one of the most powerful communist orators.

Party of Australia, the communist movement generally, and the working class movement for a better life.

The writer's integrity and respect for historical accuracy in no way detracts from the passion and conviction with which he analyses events. The book is not merely an academic exercise but also an important political analysis of the period.

His comments on Stalin and on errors made by the Comintern and the communist parties are cases in point. On the one hand, he shows the dynamism and the positive features of Stalin's record in the early period of the Soviet state; on the other, the criticism of Stalin in "Lenin's Will", and his proposal that Stalin should be removed because of his negative qualities from the position of general secretary of the party.

Later, as he shows, with the gradual accumulation of absolute power, Stalin exhibited, on a massive scale, the negative characteristics that Lenin had observed.

Having formerly tolerated opposition, he changed to a ruthless dictator suppressing all opposed views and distorting socialist concepts in the establishment of Soviet society. The loss of personal freedom, the brutality and injustice that led to the exile of millions to the prison camps described by Solzhenitsyn, are, perhaps, not adequately presented. Nor, perhaps, is sufficient attention given to the impact of Stalinism on the world communist movement: the concept that the Russian form of communism was a model for other parties and countries.

However, by implication, this comes through in Gibson's treatment of the relations between the USSR and Yugoslavia and China. In discussing Stalin's role, the writer also deals with the dialogue and conflict with Trotsky, and its impact on events such as the bitter divisions on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War.

Dealing with the role of the Comintern, he contrasts Lenin's concept of an organisation in which conflicting views and factions should have full freedom of expression with its development under Stalin as a monolith, highly organised, almost on military lines, when dissent from the "official" view became dangerous and could even lead to lethal consequences.

It became the instrument of Stalin's rule over the international communist movement.

Gibson comments on both positive aspects and on some of the serious political errors of the Comintern, such as its view that the Labor Social Democratic parties were the principal deceivers of the working class and that they were the means by which fascism would come to power. Hence, the practice of describing Social Democratic leaders as "social fascists" and "left social fascists". This practice intensified the conflict between the Social Democrats and the communists in Germany, assisting Hitler in his rise to power. When the Comintern realised its error and, through Dimitrov, projected a policy of a United Front against fascism, the damage had been done.

Gibson gives considerable attention to "left sectarianism" in the communist movement and in the Communist Party of Australia, including left sectarian errors in which he himself participated.

His analysis of such errors contains the comment that "a vanguard can only win when masses of people rally behind it, and when it is, all the time, looking for new allies" (p.50). He has an interesting comment on this question in a view expressed by Tito who was, at that time, working as a member of the Comintern. The time was 1940, and the USSR, having been effectively rebuffed by the Western powers, had signed a pact with Hitler which included the partition of Poland.

The USSR itself defended its action and, in some of its public statements, appeared to be friendly to the Nazi regime. Tito, concerned with probable Nazi aggression against Yugoslavia, "expressed the view that working class struggle could not be directed from outside the country".

In other words, the perceived diplomatic policies expressed by the USSR did not automatically require acceptance by national parties.

Tito's independent position on this issue was to lead to a direct and violent clash with Stalin in the post-war period and to the exclusion of Yugoslavia from the Comintor Natioa in the Comintern.
One of the central issues in which Ralph Gibson has been directly engaged for almost the whole of his political life is the struggle against war which, in the 1930s, also directly involved the anti-fascist movement. Attendance at the Brussels conference brought him into direct participation in the ideological struggles among diverse ideological and political trends.

The views presented at the conference, the "leftism" of some delegates, the concern of the pacifists with the injustices of the Versailles Treaty that, to a degree, prevented them from seeing the threat of fascism, and the conflicting views on communism and the role of the USSR all presented problems.

The communist movement was already calling for the United Front of the working class and a Popular Front of wider and more diverse elements of society.

The Spanish Civil War was being fought and the issues of unity against fascism and the corruption of large sections of the ruling class by fascist ideologies were already being debated.

On his return to Australia after the conference, Gibson was involved again in building the anti-war and anti-fascist movement.

His detailed account of the Movement Against War and Fascism, the visit of Egon Kisch and Gerald Griffin to Australia, and the struggle against the appeasement and pro-Nazi views and policies of Menzies are an important component of the book.

On the outbreak of war, the Communist Party at first took up an anti-Nazi position, but confusion arose quickly when it appeared that the pact signed by Molotov and Ribbentrop had changed the nature of the war. Was it still an imperialist war, or had the Soviet-Nazi pact made it something different?

Ralph makes a searching analysis of the debate, of the policy of the Australian party discussing the confused position for a period, the attack by the reactionary Menzies government and the period of illegality.

He reaches the conclusion, "We underestimated the changes that were occurring and, to some extent, lost touch with the potential life of the time ... I believe now that we were on the right track in the early days of the war when we declared our support for the war, and demanded that it be waged on an anti-fascist basis".

To do justice to this book, a reviewer would need to make an historical summary and analysis of the whole period, and to refer to the intense political debate of the time. It covers the years when the Communist Party of Australia had about 2,000 members, over fifty percent of them unemployed, to its increase to about 5,000 at the end of the decade, and the beginning of the rapid expansion of the war years that took it to its peak of over 20,000 by 1945.

Consequently, it deals with struggles of the unemployed workers, the Chinese Peace Conference, etc." (p.29). He pays tribute to often unskilled workers who developed a knowledge of theory and organisational skills that helped to build the party.

On the international issues, Gibson has chapters on the Spanish Civil War, the Chinese Revolution, the Indian struggle for independence, and a brief survey of the early years of the war. In all cases, the dialectical relationship of theory and practice is developed.

As a kind of postscript, Gibson adds a chapter on the arts and the social struggle, again dealing with theoretical and practical questions such as socialist realism, the relationship of the artist and society and other matters which may appear arcane to some, but are part of the warp and woof of civilised society.

This is a book of modesty, pride and integrity: modesty as to Ralph Gibson's own part, pride in the party and its achievements, and the integrity of the scholar who tackles the hard questions as well as the easy ones.

Bill Gollan is a former school principal and long time peace activist.