WE ARE TODAY at the end of that historical epoch in the development of socialism which began with the collapse of the Second International in 1914 and the victory of the Bolsheviks in October 1917. This is therefore a suitable time to survey the history of the Communist Parties which were the characteristic and dominant forms of the revolutionary movement in this era. The task is difficult because Communist Party historiography has special complications, which will be considered below in connection with James Klugmann's regrettable failure to overcome them1, but also for wider reasons.

Each Communist Party was the child of the marriage of two ill-assorted partners, a national left and the October Revolution. That marriage was based both on love and convenience. For

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Eric Hobsbawm is recognised as one of the foremost marxist historians. This article first appeared in New Left Review No. 54, and is reproduced here with permission of the author and the publishers.
anyone whose political memories go back no further than Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, or the Sino-Soviet split, it is almost impossible to conceive what the October Revolution meant to those who are now middle-aged and old. It was the first proletarian revolution, the first regime in history to set about the construction of the socialist order, the proof both of the profundity of the contradictions of capitalism, which produced wars and slumps, and the possibility—the certainty—that socialist revolution would succeed. It was the beginning of world revolution. It was the beginning of the new world. Only the naive believed that Russia was the workers' paradise, but even among the sophisticated it enjoyed the general indulgence which the left of the 1960's now gives only to revolutionary regimes in some small countries, such as Cuba and Vietnam. At the same time the decisions of revolutionaries in other countries to adopt the Bolshevik model of organisation, to subordinate themselves to a Bolshevik International (i.e. eventually to the CPSU and Stalin), was due not only to natural enthusiasm, but also to the evident failure of all alternative forms of organisation, strategy and tactics. Social democracy and anarcho-syndicalism had failed, while Lenin had succeeded. It seemed sensible to follow the recipe of success.

The element of rational calculation increasingly prevailed, after the ebbing of what had, in the years after 1917, looked like the tide of global revolution. It is, of course, almost impossible to separate it in practice from the passionate and total loyalty which individual Communists felt to their cause, which was equated with their Party, which in turn meant loyalty to the Communist International, and the USSR (i.e. Stalin). Still, whatever their private feelings, it soon became clear that separation from the Communist Party, whether by expulsion or secession, meant an end to effective revolutionary activity. Bolshevism in the Comintern period did not produce schisms and heresies of practical importance except in a few remote countries of small global significance, such as Ceylon. Those who left the Party were forgotten or ineffective, unless they rejoined the 'reformists' or went into some overtly 'bourgeois' group, in which case they were no longer of interest to revolutionaries, or unless they wrote books which might or might not become influential on the left some thirty years later. The real history of Trotskyism as a political trend in the international communist movement is posthumous. The strongest among such exiled Marxists worked quietly in isolation until times changed, the weakest broke under the strain and turned passionately anticomunist, to supply the CIA culture of the 1950's with several militants, the average retreated into the hard shell of sectarianism. The communist movement was not effectively split. Still, it paid a price for its cohesion: a substantial, sometimes an enormous, turn-
over of members. The joke about the largest party being that of the ex-Communists has a basis in fact.

The discovery that Communists had little choice about their loyalty to Stalin and the USSR was first made—though perhaps only at the highest levels of the parties—in the middle 1920's. Clear-sighted and unusually strong-minded Communist leaders like Palmiro Togliatti soon realised that they could not in the interest of their national movement, afford to oppose whoever came out on top in the CPSU, and tried to explain this to those less in touch with the Moscow scene, such as Gramsci. (Of course even a total willingness to go along with Stalin was no guarantee of political, or for residents of the USSR physical survival in the 1930's.) Under the circumstances loyalty to Moscow ceased to depend on approval of the Moscow line, but became an operational necessity. That most Communists also tried to rationalise this by proving to themselves that Moscow was right at all times is another matter, though it is relevant to the argument, because it confirmed the clear-headed minority in the belief that they would never be able to take their parties with them against Moscow. A British Communist who attended the meeting of the leadership in September 1939 which was told that the war was not, after all, supposed to be a people's anti-fascist war but just an imperialist one, recalls saying to himself: 'That's it. There's nothing to be done. An imperialist war it is.' He was right at the time. Nobody bucked Moscow successfully until Tito carried his party against Stalin in 1948—to Stalin's and a lot of other party leaders' surprise. Still, he was by then not only a leader of a party but also of a nation and a State.

There was, of course, another factor involved: internationalism. Today, when the international Communist movement has largely ceased to exist as such, it is hard to recapture the immense strength which its members drew from the consciousness of being soldiers in a single international army, operating, with whatever tactical multiformity and flexibility, a single grand strategy of world revolution. Hence the impossibility of any fundamental or long-term conflict between the interest of a national movement and the International, which was the real Party, of which the national units were no more than disciplined sections. That strength was based both on realistic argument and moral conviction. What convinced in Lenin was not so much his socio-economic analysis—after all, at a pinch something like his theory of imperialism can be derived from earlier marxist writings—but his palpable genius for organising a revolutionary party and mastering the tactics and strategy of making revolution. At the same time the Comintern was intended to, and very largely did, give the movement immunity against the terrible collapse of its ideals.
Communists, it was agreed, would never behave like international social democracy in 1914, abandoning its flag to follow the banners of nationalism, into mutual massacre. And, it must be said, they did not. There is something heroic about the British and French CPs in September 1939. Nationalism, political calculation, even common sense, pulled one way, yet they unhesitatingly chose to put the interests of the international movement first. As it happens, they were tragically and absurdly wrong. But their error, or rather that of the Soviet line of the moment, and the politically absurd assumption in Moscow that a given international situation implied the same reactions by very differently situated parties, should not lead us to ridicule the spirit of their action. This is how the socialists of Europe should have acted in 1914 and did not: carrying out the decisions of their International. This is how the Communists did act when another world war broke out. It was not their fault that the International should have told them to do something else.

The problem of those who write the history of Communist parties is therefore unusually difficult. They must recapture the unique and, among secular movements, unprecedented temper of Bolshevism, equally remote from the liberalism of most historians and the permissive and self-indulgent activism of most contemporary ultras. There is no understanding it without a grasp of that sense of total devotion which made the Party in Auschwitz make its members pay their dues in cigarettes (inconceivably precious and almost impossible to obtain in an extermination camp), which made the cadres accept the order not merely to kill Germans in occupied Paris, but first to acquire, individually, the arms to do so, and which made it virtually unthinkable for them to refuse to return to Moscow even to certain imprisonment or death. There is no understanding either the achievements or the perversions of Bolshevism without this, and both have been monumental; and certainly no understanding of the extraordinary success of Communism as a system of education for political work.

But the historians must also separate the national elements within Communist parties from the international, including those currents within national movements, which carried out the international line not because they had to, but because they were in genuine agreement with it. They must separate the genuinely international elements in Comintern policy from those which reflected only the state interests of the USSR or the tactical or other pre-occupations of Soviet internal politics. In both national and international policies, they must distinguish between those based on knowledge, ignorance or hunch, on marxist analysis (good or bad), on local tradition, the imitation of suitable or unsuitable foreign examples, or sheer trial and error, tactical insight or ideological formula. They must,
above all, make up their mind which policies were successful and sensible and which were neither, resisting the temptation to dismiss the Comintern en bloc as a failure or a Russian puppet show.

These problems are particularly difficult for the historian of the British CP because, except for a few brief periods, they appear to be so unimportant in this country. The party was both entirely loyal to Moscow, entirely unwilling to involve itself in Russian or international controversies, and an unquestioned chip off the native working class block. Its path was not littered with lost or expelled leaders, heresies and deviations. Admittedly it enjoyed the advantage of smallness, which meant that the International did not expect the spectacular results which put such a strain on, say, the German party, and of operating in a country which, even on the most cursory inspection, was unlike most of Europe and the other continents. Being the child, not of a political split in social-democracy, but of the unification of the various groups of the extreme left, which had always operated to some extent outside the Labor Party, it could not be plausibly regarded as an alternative mass party to Labor, at least an immediate alternative. Hence it was left free—indeed it was generally encouraged—to pursue the tasks to which militant British leftwingers would have devoted themselves anyway, and because they were Communists, to do so with unusual self-abnegation and efficiency. Indeed initially Lenin was chiefly concerned to discourage the sectarianism and hostility to Labor, to which the native ultra-Left was spontaneously drawn. The periods when the international line went against the grain of the national leftwing strategy and tactics (as in 1928-34 and 1939-41) stand out as anomalies in the history of British Communism, just because there was so obviously—as there was not in all other countries—such a strategy. So long as there was no realistic prospect of revolution, there was only one TUC and the Labor Party was the only—and still growing—party likely to win the support of the politically conscious workers on a national scale, in practice there was only one realistically conceivable road of socialist advance. The disarray of the Left today (inside and outside the Labor Party) is due largely to the fact that these things can no longer be taken for granted and that there are no generally accepted alternative strategies.

Nevertheless, this apparent simplicity of the British communists’ situation conceals a number of questions. In the first place, what exactly did the International expect of the British, other than that they should turn themselves into a proper Communist Party, and—from a not entirely certain date—that they should assist the communist movements in the Empire? What precisely was the role of Britain in its general strategy and how did it change? This is by
no means clear from the existing historical literature, which is admittedly (apart from Macfarlane's book) not of high quality.2

In the second place, why was the impact of the CP in the 1920's so modest, even by unexacting standards? Its membership was tiny and fluctuating, its successes the reflection partly of the radical and militant mood of the Labor movement, partly of the fact that communists still operated largely within the Labor Party or at least with its local support. Not until the 1930's did the CP become, in spite of its modest but growing membership, its electoral weakness and the systematic hostility of the Labor leadership, the effective national left.

Thirdly, what was the base of communist support? Why did it fail, again before the 1930's, to attract any significant body of support among intellectuals, and rapidly shed most of the relatively few it attracted (mostly from the ex-Fabian and Guild Socialist Left)? What was the nature of its unusually strong influence — though not necessarily membership — in Scotland and Wales? What happened in the 1930's to turn the party into what it had not previously been, a body of factory militants?

And, of course, there are all the questions which will inevitably be asked about the rightness or wrongness of the party's changing line, and more fundamentally, of this particular type of organisation in the context of inter-war and post-1945 Britain.

James Klugmann has not seriously tackled any of them. This extremely able and lucid man is clearly capable of writing a satisfactory history of the Communist Party, and where he feels unconstrained, he does so. Thus he provides the best and clearest account of the formation of the party at present available. Unfortunately he is paralysed by the impossibility of being both a good historian and a loyal functionary. The only way yet discovered to write a public "official" history of any organisation is to hand the material over to one or more professional historians who are sufficiently in sympathy not to do a hatchet job, sufficiently uninvolved not to mind opening cupboards for fear of possible skeletons, and who can, if the worst come to the worst, be officially disavowed. That is, essentially, what the British government did with the official history of the Second World War, and the result has been that Webster and Frankland were able to produce a history of the air war which destroys many familiar myths and treads on many service and political toes, but is both scholarly and useful — not least to anyone who wishes to judge or plan strategy. The Italian CP is the only one which has so far chosen this sensible, but to most politicians almost unthinkable, course. Paolo Spriano has therefore

been able to write a debatable, but serious and scholarly work. James Klugmann has been able to do neither. He has merely used his considerable gifts to avoid writing a disreputable one.

In doing so he has, I am afraid, wasted much of his time. What, after all, is the use of spending ten years on the sources — including those in Moscow — when the only precise references to contemporary unpublished CP sources — give or take one or two — appear to number seven and the only references even to printed Communist International sources (including Inprecorr) number less than a dozen in a volume of 370 pages. The rest are substantially references to the published reports, pamphlets and especially periodicals of the CP in this period. In 1921-2 the Presidium of the Comintern discussed Britain 13 times — more often than any country other than the French, Italian, Hungarian and German parties. One would not have known it from Klugmann's book, whose index lacks all reference to Zinoviev (except in connection with the forged letter bearing his name), Borodin, Petrovsky-Bennet, or, for that matter, so purely British a field of party activity as the Labor Research Department.

An adequate history of the CP cannot be written by systematically avoiding or fudging genuinely controversial issues and matter likely to be regarded as indiscreet or bad public relations within the organisation. It cannot even be offset by describing and documenting, more fully than ever before, the activities of the militants. It is interesting to have 160 or so pages on the party's work from 1920 to 1923, but the basic fact about this period is that recorded in Zinoviev's Report to the 4th World Congress at the end of 1922, namely that "In no other country, perhaps, does the communist movement make such slow progress", and this fact is not really faced. Even the popular contemporary explanation that this was due to mass unemployment is not seriously discussed. In brief, Klugmann has done some justice to the devoted and often forgotten militants who served the British working class as best they knew how. He has written a textbook for their successors in party schools, with all the clarity and ability which have made his high reputation as a teacher in such courses. He has provided a fair amount of new information, some of which will only be recognised by the very expert at deciphering careful formulations, and little of which — on important matters — is documented.

But he has neither written a satisfactory history of the CP nor of the role of the CP in British politics. And if he applies the same methods to volume 2, where the "controversial issues" become less easily avoidable, he will produce an even more disappointing book.