

Political Tourists:
Travellers from Australia to the Soviet Union in the 1920s-1940s

Sheila Fitzpatrick & Carolyn Rasmussen (eds)
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In both Australia and Britain, the Communist Party of each country respectively dissolved in 1991 as the Eastern bloc collapsed and did so in a similar manner, from both internal schisms and outside influences. In the past decade and a half, both Communist Parties have been the focus of much academic interest, with significant research devoted to the analysis of the Parties' domestic politics, as well as its relationship to the Soviet Union. In Britain, the CPGB has been criticised by both the centre-right and the left (much more the latter in scholarly circles) for its uncritical support for the Soviet Union, especially during the height of Stalin's dictatorship. However at the same time, there has been a move by some academics to approach the Party from a grass-roots perspective and analyse the Party's role in local and national politics, most prominently in the areas of unemployment, anti-fascism, industrial relations and peace movements. The most recent work published in this area has been Kevin Morgan, Andrew Flinn and Gidon Cohen's *Communists and British Society, 1920-1991*, with other works by Alan Campbell and John McIlroy to be published in the near future. This focus on grass-roots politics has been criticised by some for not emphasising the massive influence the Soviet Union had upon the CPGB throughout its existence, which has led to continuing debates between those who focus on the macro-history of the CPGB in its domestic context and those who focus on the presence of the Soviet Union. This debate has tended to engulf the whole historiography of the CPGB and historians now have to negotiate any primary research through this schism. John Newsinger has possibly been closest to reconciling the two conflicting ends of this discourse, stating that while the CPGB should be seen 'as a party that certainly engaged in campaigns and struggles carried on in the interests of the British working class', the Party 'has to be defined by its uncritical support for the brutal, murderous tyranny that was emerging in the Soviet Union and by its willingness to subordinate itself to the changing requirements of the Stalin regime'. These two histories are not contradictory, but, as Newsinger declares, 'the first is contained within the second' – study of the Communist Party's domestic work

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without mention of its ties to the Soviet Union, especially up until 1956, cannot be done satisfactorily.

The literature in the historiography of the Communist Party of Australia has followed a similar path to that of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Before the 1990s, the literature on the CPA could be generally categorised into Party hagiographies, far left critiques, anti-communist Cold War publications and autobiographies, which fit into the three former categories. Scholarly work on the CPA was limited to a few monographs, theses and journal articles, before the collapse of the organisation seemed to generate a new wave of academic interest. Like the literature on the CPGB, the historians writing about the CPA were especially concerned with the role of the Comintern in the development of the Communist movement in Australia and the sinister connotations of 'Moscow Gold'. This has led to specialist histories in journal articles that focus on the correspondence between the CPA and the Comintern, microfilms of which are stored in the Mitchell Library in Sydney and more recently, the ADFA Library in Canberra. General and narrative histories of the Communist Party of Australia, unlike the Lawrence & Wishart series or those by Willie Thompson, Francis Beckett, David Renton and James Eaden on the CPGB, are yet to be published, although Stuart Macintyre's 1998 book, *The Reds*, is an excellent start. Macintyre's book is a commanding text and makes excellent use of Comintern archival material, as well as internal Party documents held by the Search Foundation, what Macintyre describes as the 'successor of the Communist Party'. However Macintyre's history ends with the Allied victory in the Second World War and the post-war history of the CPA still to be written. Recent work by Phillip Deery and Rachael Calkin on the events of 1956 upon the CPA has been published in the *Australian Journal of History & Politics* and is a promising beacon for further research.

One area of communism in Australian history that has been developed, where British scholarship has yet to, concerns the relationship between the Soviet Union and intellectuals on the left, particularly those who visited the Soviet Union during the inter-war period. Cohen and Morgan have studied what they described as 'Stalin's Sausage Machine', the International Lenin School in Moscow, where prestigious Communist Party members were sent to be 'Bolshevised' and become leading Party

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cadres, but this is only limited to the approximately 160 CPGB members who attended the school between 1926 and 1937. While authors, such as Martin Amis in his debates with Eric Hobsbawm, question why intellectuals inside the Communist Party held the CPSU in such high regard, even after visiting the Soviet Union, what has not been adequately analysed in recent years is how the Soviet Union affected others who sympathised with the Soviet Union, but were not hardened Party members. This is what *Political Tourists: Travellers from Australia to the Soviet Union in the 1920s-1940s* has done.

Based on the proceedings of the 'Australian Visitors to the Soviet Union' conference held at the University of Melbourne in 2006, distinguished Russian historian Sheila Fitzpatrick and Carolyn Rasmussen have collected a series of accounts of Australians who visited, for one reason or another, the Soviet Union between the early 1920s and the 1950s. Most of the authors included in this book have written extensively on the Communist Party of Australia elsewhere, such as Joy Damousi, Terry Irving, Phillip Deery and John MacNair, and should be well known to labour and social historians in Australia, but also internationally. However there is a difference between the histories included in this book and the general socio-political histories of the CPA, with the accounts here very much focusing on the individual and their experiences in the Soviet Union, rather than a wider Party context. What are drawn upon in many of the accounts are the writings of the visitors, particularly their contemporary political writing and later autobiographical accounts, as well as personal papers and archived material from Australia and Russia. In contrast to the documentation of the individual, Fitzpatrick, who provides the preface and introduction chapter, utilises the continual openings of the Russian archives to provide a wider historical context for the book's other accounts, focusing on the opened archive of the VOKS organisation. VOKS, the All-Union Society for Ties with Abroad or *vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo kul'turnoi svyazi s zagranitsej*, was a quasi-official organisation which assisted foreign visitors in their travels to the Soviet Union, whose main task, according to Fitzpatrick, was 'to ensure that the visitors went away with a good impression of the Soviet Union'. Fitzpatrick's analysis of the archived VOKS material demonstrates that this was sometimes a difficult task, especially when dealing with visitors who came for a multitude of reasons, rather than merely disciplined CPA members.

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One of the purposes of the book, as Fitzpatrick states, is to address the notion of the political tourist or ‘pilgrim’, which Paul Hollander explored in his 1981 work, *Political Pilgrims*, and whether the stereotype of a manipulative Soviet Union and an unwitting visitor was an accurate description. As Fitzpatrick and the other accounts demonstrate, the title of the book and the notion of the political tourist might actually be a misnomer, as there were a number of reasons that people outside the Communist Party (and even some within) ventured to the Soviet Union. Some visited the Soviet Union in the early days of the Socialist Republic, as the Russian Civil War was concluding, drawn by the romanticism of the 1917 revolution, such as Muriel Heagney, as described by Rosemary Francis in her chapter. Others came in the late 1920s and 1930s as the Soviet Union started to undergo a campaign of massive industrialisation and Josef Stalin took dictatorial control of the CPSU, where people wanted to witness the development of a modern society based on an alternative to capitalism, which seemed to grow as the Great Depression plunged the rest of the world into economic crisis. This included many people who came in a professional capacity, such as Professor J. Neill Greenwood and Reginald Ellery, whose visits are explored by Rasmussen and Damousi respectively. There was also a sense of adventure and the idea of the Soviet Union as an ‘exotic travel destination’, which drew visitors to the USSR, including a large number of women. As Fitzpatrick notes, and is amply reflected in several of the book’s chapters, ‘Almost 40 per cent... were women travelling independently... What these women liked about the Soviet Union was women’s equality’, no matter their political allegiance.

What is surprising about the book is the number of ‘fellow travellers’ that returned to Australia with enthusiasm for the Soviet Union and the socialist project, which seems to challenge recent assertions made by authors, such as Francis Beckett. That is not to say that people did not return disillusioned from what they had witnessed in the Soviet Union or that their keenness for Marxism-Leninism did not wane in the coming years, as clearly it did for some. The chapters by Irving, Damousi and Jeff Sparrow all demonstrate that some objected to, or found distasteful, the Soviet Union’s version of socialism and the CPA’s uncritical support of the Stalinist dictatorship. But it is quite remarkable to note that at least half of those who visited the Soviet Union in the Stalin era deemed their visit to be positive and maintained their support for the USSR into the Cold War period. Although Fitzpatrick’s archival analysis makes a fascinating

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introduction, the lack of a concluding chapter to re-emphasise this seems to leave the book without a wider historical conclusion. After the individual accounts, a final chapter to demonstrate how these macro-histories fit into the wider historical context of the international communist movement and the history of communism in Australia would have been beneficial. For the most part though, *Political Tourists* is a welcome addition to the literature and will prove engaging for other historians entering the historiographical debates over the Soviet Union and its relationship with domestic Communist Parties.

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