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"THE AMERICAN INTELLIGENTSIA'S ONGOING COLD WAR"

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Summary

As the Cold War simmered between the United States and the Soviet Union, a concurrent conflict festered among American historians. In what the New York Times has called "the American intelligentsia's ongoing cold war," over the last seven decades two supposedly contradictory academic approaches – revisionism and traditionalism – have been utilized to explain the rise, the nature, and the fall of Communism in the US and abroad. Proponents of these contrasting approaches have simultaneously engaged in often heated and personal debates, and it is the purpose of this piece to explore these debates and to look at attempts to productively resolve them. Rather than argue for the primacy of one particular form of history, this author concludes that the diversity of practices present in the field of American Communist Studies represents a methodological strength and not a weakness.

Key Words: Communism, United States, Soviet Union, Historiography, Methodology, CPUSA.

Introduction: "The Oedipal conflicts of red-diaper babies…"[1]

In the winter of 1939, the American Communist literary journal *New Masses* featured a cartoon labeled "when the locomotive of history takes a sharp turn.".[2] The drawing, of a train barreling away towards a distant Communist utopia as various passengers are flung off, bluntly reminded the reader that Bolshevism was not for everyone. Coming as it did in the midst of the Communist Party of the United States' (CPUSA) very abrupt shift towards isolationism following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between the USSR and Nazi Germany, this message certainly rung true.

That sudden break, the moment when the train abruptly changed tracks and person and party became irreconcilable, is a near universal feature in the biographies of ex-Communists, and by the early 1940s there were probably more ex-Communists than Communists in the US. Given the contentious character of the movement's history this is to be expected. Moreover, it is mirrored in a similarly contentious historiography dominated for many years by former loyalists, fellow travelers, and their children, all with varying degrees of affinity or hostility for the party of their parents or their youth.

In his study of the relationship between African-Americans and the CPUSA, Mark Solomon suggested that "the knowledge and feelings of historians are shaped largely by their personal circumstances," and Solomon himself "grew up in the 1940s and matured in the 1950s…in a political milieu that was still strongly influenced by the Communist Party and its allies.".[3] Such backgrounds were so typical among historians in the field that Michael Denning began his acknowledgements in *The Cultural Front* with the assurance that "my parents grew up during the depression and World War II, but I was not a red diaper baby."[4] Just as commonly, older scholars such as Joseph Starobin commenced their seminal works with a recounting of their own experiences within the CPUSA – and in Starobin's case, the generational passing on of that experience to his son, who became a leading New Left activist in the 1960s. In 1999, *The New York Times* rather sardonically concluded that "wrapped up in the American intelligentsia's ongoing cold war [over Communism] are unresolved feelings of personal betrayal and the Oedipal conflicts of red-diaper babies."[5] Thus the often intimate nature of the topic at hand, coupled with its broadly controversial status within American society, unsurprisingly and expectedly ensured that conflicts between the subject's historians would be regular and heated. Another prominent Manhattan-based media outlet, the *New York Review of Books*, would play host to their most public and bitter feuding.

The matter came to a head in the spring of 1985, as the actual Cold War still clutched much of the Eurasian subcontinent in its frozen grasp. The recent Able Archer military exercises, which had been meant to realistically simulate a NATO reaction to a nuclear strike, had brought the world unexpectedly close to real nuclear Armageddon. Although a new premier, Mikhail Gorbachev, had taken power in the USSR that March his groundbreaking peace talks abroad and his monumental economic and political reforms at home were still to come. The very idea that the Cold War could end in the next six years would have struck many as absurd – the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) included. A declassified 1985 CIA report titled "Soviet Capacities for Strategic Nuclear Conflict Through the Mid-1990s" clearly indicated that the agency assumed that the current Soviet power structure would survive at least another decade, and the authors further determined that their adversary would grow stronger as "all elements of Soviet strategic offensive forces will be extensively modernized."[6] The enduring geopolitical stalemate had by this point been historical fact, present reality, and the foreseeable future for four decades and in that time public intellectuals and commentators had developed a running discourse and debate over how to define and explain the conflict.

By the mid-1980s this debate had begun to resemble the global struggle it revolved around: two seemingly static sides endlessly fighting old ideological battles. And 1985 in particular proved to be a flash point, a moment when the academic "cold war" briefly went hot. At Stanford University, the faculty denied well-known Polish historian and anti-Communist Norman Davies tenure by one vote in what *The Stanford Daily* labeled "the closest, most acrimonious tenure decision of recent years."[7] While many in the university's history department lined up behind the decision, a number of preeminent officials and academics such as Zbigniew Brzezinski and Noam Chomsky criticized the move. At the same time, Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn's new novel *August 1914*

kindled heated arguments about the anti-Communist author's sociopolitical worldview.[8] His critics and defenders, Ivy League professors and Nobel prize-winning novelists alike, presented a similarly star-studded line up. And as these disputes raged, the former fellow traveller and *Daily Worker* editor-turned-scholar Theodore Draper wrote a series of essays for the *New York Review of Books* that both anointed a new discipline – American Communist Studies – and at the same time tore it to pieces.

Debates: "These are matters worth fussing about…"

"American communism has become a minor academic industry," Draper began his first article, observing that the subject had started to develop all the trappings of a traditional academic field.[9] It had a trade organization, a journal, a newsletter, mass gatherings, and maybe most importantly, competing factions. These factions, and their fundamental and outwardly irreconcilable differences, formed the basis for his introduction – in which Draper divided the fledgling field into two groups, the "new" historians and the "old" historians (or, alternatively, revisionists and traditionalists). Finding himself stoutly in the latter cluster, he argued that "the political line and historical bias that have come to be the distinguishing marks of the new historians" are plainly visible to all and "they themselves make no secret of their line and bias, and often in the most belligerent and provocative manner."[10] This would come to be one of the central themes in the disagreement, as each side accused the other's research of being almost irredeemably marred by a combination of ideological bias and methodological flaws.

Leaving aside the validity of Draper's contentious assertions about this "new" scholarship, which remain as contested today as the moment he wrote them, he went on to make a compelling claim about the cyclical complexion of academic research:

> In order for there to be a new history, there must be an old history to be fought and vanquished. There must be a new generation of historians versus an old. It also helps if there is a new methodology allegedly superior to the old. And to make the struggle between the new and old particularly sharp and heated, historical differences should be treated as political conflicts, preferably among radicals, liberals, and conservatives.[11]

This is an apt description not merely of trends within the discipline of American Communist Studies specifically, but of trends in humanities research more broadly. Successive cohorts of scholars find fault with their precursors, carve new paths, and define themselves in opposition to the older other. Through a combination of professional incentives, which encourage junior academics to set themselves apart through the production of "original" research, and the natural advances that come with the continued accumulation of knowledge over time, which ensure that each ensuing cohort does undeniably provide added value to the field, an enduring dichotomy has been created. To borrow from the headline of the 1999 article in *The New York Times* on the topic, this is a "war without end." And Draper's essay, while cogently and foresightedly unpacking this state of affairs, also undoubtedly played a part in instigating and perpetuating the cycle. The book reviews, which made up the bulk of his magazine piece, ended up taking a back seat to these heated introductory remarks.

Within months *The New York Review of Books* published a number of rebuttals from the "new" historians themselves, and their rebuttals were perhaps even more antagonistic. Draper's original essay only served to "illustrate how opaque the cataracts on [his] scholarly vision have become," said Paul Buhle – who would go on to write the revisionist classic *Marxism in the United States*.[12] He ended with some "friendly advice" to "take the blows and remember that the young

sometimes need to clear away space."[13] Buhle's not so friendly advice, and the blows that came with it, would be repeated by nearly a dozen other scholars in similar such letters to the editor. They accused Draper of "red baiting" and of creating a "hit list," of spouting "ingenious half-truth[s]" and of having "attacked and distorted" the works in question.[14] Amidst the mud-flinging, however, a lasting narrative began to form around what one of the authors, James R. Barrett, called "the emerging debate over the history of the Communist Party."[15]

While Draper had spent a good bit of his initial piece setting out to define the "new" historians, these in turn set out to define the "old" historians. As Barrett put it, "if we [revisionists] have advocated social over institutional political history, it is in an effort to get a fuller and therefore more accurate view of the Communist Party." Conversely, the "Draper-Klehr" approach, to adopt the term used by the scholar James R. Prickett, suffered from a fundamental "defect" – "by attributing everything to Soviet influence, it actually obscures precisely what the real Soviet influence, was."[16] The Klehr in this labeling was the political scientist Harvey Klehr, a professor at Emory University and ostensible protégé of Draper whose *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade*, published a year earlier, had faced a great deal of criticism from many revisionist historians. They maintained that Klehr's and Draper's theoretical approach, and by extension the work of traditionalist scholars generally, was the "result of the conceptual diminishment," specifically due to their alleged reliance on "the greatest sacred cow of all, the 'Soviet domination' shibboleth which Klehr and Draper hold onto like a security blanket."[17]

In these diatribes we see the rhetorical battle lines being drawn and cemented between two "blocs" of scholarship, though funnily enough neither bloc wanted to admit to its own presence. In typical fashion, Roy Rosenzweig assured the magazine's readers that "the notion of a unified bloc of youthful 'new historians of American Communism' is mostly a figment of Draper's imagination."[18] Analogously, Draper distanced himself from Klehr and his work, clarifying that "I did not then know Klehr well enough to know in advance how it was going to come out."[19] There is a certain irony here in that these debates – in which disagreeing parties framed each other as colluding factions while disavowing their own faction's existence – mirrored debates within the American Communist movement itself, where factionalism had always been considered a serious offense. Though in this case, of course, this strictly academic and decentralized scholarly field lacked the stringent command, control, and discipline mechanisms that governed and regulated the CPUSA and its members.

Yet these impassioned disagreements over classification and definitions also hinted at some of the inherent problems with such heated, confrontational, and at times personal attacks. Namely, that labeling, categorizing, and then dismantling one's opponents based on one's own constructions tends to obscure the nuance in these opponent's positions while simultaneously missing any parallels between both parties. In many cases a close reading of the written work of the "old" historians reveals a greater sympathy for the individual interests, beliefs, and efforts of American Communists than might be assumed based on the revisionist's invectives alone. A comparable reading of assorted "new" histories also often divulges a more serious acknowledgement of Soviet control than one necessarily would have been led to assume by Draper's own appraisals. The heightened tensions of the 1980s, when the Cold War stretched endlessly into the horizon and academics with personal and political connections to the great ideological movements of yesteryear fought over a long irrelevant party and its diminishing legacy, made any hopes for collaboration futile. But all directly involved could agree on at least one point. As Draper mused in his final contribution to the *New York Review of Books* dispute, "these are matters worth fussing about."[20]

Resolutions: "We have lived in something of a vice-grip of oppositional readings…"

As a new decade dawned, prior assumptions faded away in the face of the stunning collapse of the USSR on December 26th, 1991. Walls fell and partisan divides looked to close up with them. Politicians like Bill Clinton practiced a new Centrist political "triangulation," scholars like Francis Fukuyama famously predicted an "end to history," and journalists like Thomas F. Friedman claimed that globalization would bring about an unprecedented era of world peace and societal development. In one especially optimistic article in *The New York Times* from 1996, Friedman put forward a "Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention" which held that no two countries with a McDonald's had or would ever go to war.[21] Indeed, despite efforts by the doomed East German government to ban "McDonald's and similar abnormal garbage-makers" in 1990, corporate fast food would rapidly extend its greasy, peace-making wings into the very depths of the iron curtain.[22] The first Communist country to have welcomed the iconic double arches had been Yugoslavia in 1988. One American newspaper called the grand opening in Belgrade the "First Big Mac Attack Against Communism!"[23] Unfortunately the golden arches' diplomatic prowess proved ineffective against millennia old religious and ethnic divides, as the Yugoslav Wars would tragically demonstrate. Still, Friedman's theory – which recalled the economic ecumenism espoused by the Soviet economist Eugen Varga in the late 1940s – hinted at a more general belief in cooperation, assimilation, and amalgamation among the people paid to think about these sorts of things for a living.

These assumptions would soon penetrate and animate the field of American Communist Studies as well, though such an outcome was by no means a given. In fact, the collapse of Soviet power seemed instead to finally and definitively vindicate the claims of traditionalist scholars. For with that collapse a flood of new archival evidence flowed out of the former USSR, most notably the official records of both the Communist International (Comintern) and the CPUSA – which had been smuggled out of the US decades earlier. To the "old" historians, and many outside observers, these documents irrefutably established the centrality of Soviet influence to the operation of American Communism as a movement. As Harvey Klehr, John Early Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson suggested in their collection *The Soviet World of American Communism*, "these documents demonstrate that at every period of the CPUSA's history, the American Communists looked to their Soviet counterparts for advice on how to conduct their own party business…but there was more to it than that: these documents show that the CPUSA was never an independent political organization."[24]

Meanwhile, in an introspective 1999 review of a follow-up collection the prominent revisionist Maurice Isserman admitted that, in light of recent archival revelations, his previous work "suffered from one critical flaw: it omitted any discussion of the involvement of American Communists with Soviet espionage during World War II."[25] In language that strikingly contrasted with the hostile tone of the previous decade, he added that "Haynes and Klehr deserve the gratitude of other historians" for their efforts in obtaining the release of Soviet archival material.[26] Nonetheless, he also determined that "the 'new' history of American Communism and what might be called the new history of Communist espionage need not be mutually exclusive, let alone antagonistic, historical inquiries."[27] That a sober acknowledgement of Soviet influence in the traditionalist vein need not necessarily interfere with the adoption and use of revisionist methods had by the late 1990s already become evident to many scholars.

In 1985, Theodore Draper had somewhat contemptuously referred to this composite approach as the "blend theory."[28] He had broadly defined it as the idea that "each national

communism was a blend of international communism and national experience," and called the concept "one of those half-truths that lead to a greater and more serious untruth."[29] Interestingly, though, the revelations of the Soviet archives – far from putting the blend theory to rest once and for all – actually gave it new life. Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew's 1996 book *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* is an illustrative case. The authors noted that "in this unresolved debate between what can be termed history 'from above' and 'from below', we incline to the former."[30] They hedged that, "however, an essential component of our methodology is a recognition that the inter-war communist experience should not be reduced to the crude equation 'communist party = Comintern = agent of Moscow'."[31] Ultimately "our focus is on the 'centre'," they concluded, but that did not inevitably preclude a multifaceted approach to analyzing the international Communist apparatus as a whole.[32]

Scholars with more "from below" tendencies agreed with this assessment, and in *The Cry was Unity: Communists and African-Americans, 1917-36*, published two years later, Mark Solomon shared McDermott's and Agnew's sense of obligation to comment on this important historiographical matter. He believed that "the studies of the new historians captured American communism with far greater breadth than Draper's adroit but timeworn journey into the netherworld of foreign control."[33] But Solomon admitted that "many of the new historians had their own dogma: they conceded the external control of the Party, but granted a margin of freedom from foreign dictates in the spaces between leaders and lower level activists…in doing that, they at times succumbed to trendy anticommunism and produced incomplete, if not faulty, scholarship."[34] In their place, he put forward what might be termed a theory of "interactivity." That is, "to examine the interplay of national and international forces, of theory and practice, and of leadership and rank and file in the making and execution of policy" and to recognize that "all these people functioned within a coherent political culture that was both national and international in scope."[35] Whether one calls this a blend theory, or a theory of interactivity, these attempts to overcome ideological and methodological divides from both sides appeared to bear fruit.

Nevertheless, these supposedly more nuanced considerations did not put an end to the debates between traditionalists and revisionists. In the first two decades of the new millennium disagreements over emphasis and approach persistently arose as the battle over the history of American Communism continued to bleed into a battle over its historiography – usually featuring the same protagonists. In 2009 *American Communist History*, the field's leading (and only) journal, hosted a discussion titled "Controversy Unresolved: Theodore Draper's American Communism and Soviet Russia After 50 Years – A Symposium," the purpose of which was to share "the views of different generations of American scholars…about the changing interpretations of US political, social and cultural history, as well as the specifics of Soviet influence and the impact of forces on the Party."[36] Despite signs of a thaw in the previous decade, this symposium highlighted that what *The New York Times* once referred to as an intellectual "cold war" continued in earnest.

One of the symposium's main contributors, Bryan D. Palmer, summarized pessimistically that "for half a century since Draper's publications, then, we have lived in something of a vice-grip of oppositional readings…that vice-grip has tightened over time, as positions have hardened and political languages have articulated irreconcilable difference."[37] To that end, the scholar Jennifer R. Uhlmann asked "are we bound to remain within the confines of the debate surrounding Draper and his revisionist critics?"[38] Her answer to this quandary – and Palmer's answer as well – resembled those of scholars a decade earlier. The discipline needed a "third way," Palmer contended, and Uhlmann advocated for a "new synthesis."[39] Yet at this point one begins to wonder whether such a synthesis would really be all that novel, innovative, or even desirable, much as one is forced to

consider whether temporal labels like "new" and "old" historian still make sense when both groupings have existed for such a lengthy time period.

Conclusion: "A full range of radical possibilities…"

Perhaps a more stimulating and salient question is if such firm scholarly labels have ever fulfilled any useful academic purpose. In a 2019 essay, an exasperated Palmer prompted his readers to consider the following:

> In fair-minded ways, and especially at the point of disagreement, we should call into question obvious misrepresentation and refuse personalized distortions of analytic positions. Historiographic typecasting of the kind I have identified above does not result in better histories of Communism…let our differences be aired on the basis of accurate representations of interpretive positions…if this means reading more carefully and fully, backing away from pigeonholing assessments of arguments and analytic stands that we find uncongenial, so be it.[40]

A review of more recent literature in the field suggests that such typecasting no longer has any real interpretive value, if it ever did. Yale historian Glenda Gilmore's 2016 article "The Reddest of the Blacks" is a telling example. In this essay, she sharply criticized "the red taboo, operating as a virulent force" which "resulted in a climate that reframed the Civil Rights agenda as color-blind set of aspirations for opportunity" and "limited historians' ability to depict a full range of radical possibilities" for social justice.[41] Conversely, she also argued that "alternative futures for the South [were] occluded by the Cold War, McCarthyism, World War II, the Nazi-Soviet Pact, and Stalin's Soviet purge trials."[42] Moreover, "international events made impossible local collaborations that might have moved the South and the rest of the nation toward a more equitable society; not necessarily toward Communism, but toward justice."[43] Reading pieces like these, the line between revisionist and traditionalist becomes blurred and indistinct.

The release of Soviet archival material in the 1990s more of less conclusively established the inherently transnational nature of the Communist movement in the US. Equally, the methodological developments of the past half century have made all histories social to some degree. In the end, Palmer's most vital point is that regardless of positionality it is helpful to take a considerate, sincere, and open approach to the labor of others. This is done not simply for the sake of the author in question, but also for the sake of one's own intellectual development and production, which can suffer when one fails to fully appreciate and engage with the material or topic being considered. Efforts to strictly categorize content along ideological lines often have less to do with engendering critical and informed debate and more to do with fueling a meta-discourse around the legitimacy of said content. And to be sure, delegitimizing academic work can definitely serve a variety of particular political ends, but it does not always serve a clear scholarly purpose.

History is a kind of puzzle, and no historian has all the pieces. There is not even an overarching agreement on which pieces go where, or what the final picture might be – or whether there is a clear and coherent picture at all. But every essay, every paper, and every book fills in a bit of that puzzle. We catch a glimpse of something although, again, there is not always agreement on what that something is. Once one realizes that no single work will provide all the answers, or will even address the questions that the reader may be asking, it becomes much easier to appreciate each contribution for what it is – a part of an undeniably larger and more complex story. Maybe it is better to think of historical synthesis not within works but between them, and to see cooperation not as shared consensus but as the bringing together of diverse perspectives around a collective interest.

Whether an article is "new" or "old," traditionalist or revisionist, or takes some sort of third way becomes largely irrelevant in this framework because all constitute contributions, some admittedly more insightful or relevant than others, to an on-going discussion about a movement that everyone involved in the field agrees, to paraphrase Theodore Draper, matters.

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