

Communists and the Inter-War Anti-Fascist Struggle in the United States and Britain

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This article offers a comparison of the Communist anti-fascist experience in the United States and Britain in the inter-war period. The focus is on opposition to domestic fascism and the comparison extends across three areas, namely, respective analyses, organization, and political violence. This article demonstrates how both Communist parties initially understood fascism as a developing trend within bourgeois capitalist democracy before they, reflecting the Comintern's shift to the Popular Front, reworked their anti-fascism into different forms of democratic and progressive rhetoric. It places Communists at the forefront of anti-fascist campaigns in the US and Britain and yet, despite obvious transatlantic links, this article reveals that the organizational manifestations of their anti-fascism diverged significantly. The final section calls attention to the role of Communists in physical force anti-fascism, and reveals that Communist involvement in violent disturbances during the 1930s (if not the 1920s) appears more common in Britain than in the US. Nonetheless, it still cautions against making too much of physical confrontation as the single most important feature defining the British Communist anti-fascist experience.

KEYWORDS anti-fascism, CPGB, CPUSA, united front, popular front

Whilst there is an enormous literature on historic fascism, there is much less on anti-fascism, whether in its international or national contexts. This preoccupation with fascism means that the association between fascism and its opposition is insufficiently delineated. Fascism, even if we fail to agree on a precise definition, openly rejected the ideals of the democratic systems that had evolved over the course of the previous centuries. The historical significance of anti-fascism is that, regardless of whether it drew from Communist, Social Democratic, Liberal (or even Conservative) traditions, it claimed to stand for freedom, democracy, progress, and civilization.¹ Anti-fascism can therefore tell us much about the popular resilience or otherwise

of 'democratic' values in the inter-war period. The subject merits far more conceptual and empirical investigation, particularly from a much neglected comparative perspective.

The concern here is with Communist anti-fascism. This article compares the respective roles of the Communist Party in the US (CPUSA) and the Communist Party in Britain (CPGB) in campaigns against *domestic* fascism during the inter-war period. Regrettably, other than a recent study of Communist youth and inter-war anti-fascism in the US and Britain, the subject remains untouched from a comparative perspective.² Whilst anti-fascist movements in both countries stretched beyond the radical left, Communists were most synonymous with the anti-fascist cause and were widely seen as the most resolute anti-fascists. By examining how Communist anti-fascism operated in two different national contexts, this article probes the similarities and peculiarities of experience. The article is divided into three parts. The first part considers respective analyses of fascism. The second considers anti-fascist organization. The third part examines the place of political violence. The role that both the CPUSA and CPGB played in terms of offering solidarity and practical assistance to comrades and victims of fascism abroad, not least in relation to the anti-fascist cause in Spain, falls outside the scope of this article. My concern here is with responses to potential fascist enemies *within*.

A transatlantic comparison would not have been lost on contemporary anti-fascist writers. CPGB fellow traveller, John Strachey, devoted a whole chapter to the specific question: 'Will Fascism come to Britain and America?' in his 1933 volume, *The Menace of Fascism*. For Strachey,

It is quite true that the situation in Britain and America is by no means so developed as it is elsewhere. The effects of the economic crisis are not yet sufficiently widespread or profound to force a decision here and now. The unequalled reserve wealth of Britain and America still enables them to blunt the edge of the social conflict to a certain degree. But does anyone in their senses suppose that Britain and America are in fact fairylands, set apart from the rest of humanity, wholly and definitely different, in whose favour the laws of science and logic have been suspended so that like causes will not produce like effects?³

'For Britain and America', Strachey believed, 'are not basically different from the rest of the world. They are only a little behind-hand'.⁴ What Strachey meant was that both were bourgeois capitalist states that were heading in a fascist direction; in both he could detect the organization of the present ruling class for civil war against the mass of its own population. 'There is not the slightest doubt', Strachey writes, 'that the British and American capitalists, just so soon as they are thoroughly alarmed, will organize all their forces — their physical forces — in order to attack by violence and terror everything which threatens their position. To suppose anything else is to fall a victim to the most pitiful illusions'.⁵ In other words, what the US and Britain had in common was that both were 'classic lands of semi-Fascist methods of bourgeois domination long before Fascism', as the CPGB's leading theoretician Rajani Palme Dutt also held.⁶ What is more, Communist anti-fascists saw themselves as constitutive of a wider international struggle and, certainly in the case of the US, drew support from anti-fascist campaigns in Britain.⁷

Knowing the enemy

If both the CPUSA and the CPGB were not simply passive agents of the Communist International (Comintern) in Moscow, neither were they autonomous agents. 'It would be no exaggeration to say', Hugh Wilford has written, 'that all arguments about the history of American communism could be reduced to a single question: the relationship of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) to the Comintern'.⁸ Where traditional accounts stress the subordination of the CPUSA to Moscow; revisionists point to ways in which American Communists applied the Moscow line according to their own needs and interests as well as to specific national and local conditions. Writing in the late 1990s, Wilford believed that the 'grand opening' of the archives in Moscow had not yet established that the CPUSA 'was utterly beholden to the Comintern'.⁹ The historiographical field remains 'unsettled'.¹⁰ An equivalent debate has also engaged historians on the other side of the Atlantic. So, whilst some historians, such as Andrew Thorpe, have suggested that the CPGB was not 'constantly pulled this way and that by the Comintern',¹¹ and have called our attention to the limitations of the 'Moscow-centric view',¹² others insist that it would be wrong to play down the extent of Comintern domination.¹³

When it came to their respective analyses of fascism, what is clear is that both the CPUSA and CPGB took their cue from Moscow. Their analyses were not arrived at independently. Moreover, in both cases their analyses developed in similar directions. Corresponding to the Comintern's theoretical framework, both the CPUSA and CPGB understood fascism as a brutal form of bourgeois capitalist dictatorship, finance capital's violent attempt to avert the collapse of the ruling class through ferocious attacks on the proletarian class. In the context of the ultra-left Third Period, which theorized that the contradictions of capitalism would give rise to a new era of imperialist wars, fascism — as the most extreme form of bourgeois-imperialist reaction — became synonymous with war. In other words, like the chicken to the egg, fascism begat war. 'Fascism means War!', so the popular anti-fascist slogan of the period went.

'Because Fascism is the leading expression of modern imperialism', Dutt explained, 'of capitalism in decay, of the most violent policies of capitalism in crisis, therefore necessarily Fascism means war'.¹⁴ But this did not imply that Communists should be tempted by pacifism. On the contrary, 'This duty implies above all a determined political and ideological fight against pacifism', the CPUSA insisted in November 1933: 'The masses must be patiently enlightened as to their error and urged to join the revolutionary united front in the struggle against war. But the pacifist swindlers must be relentlessly exposed and combated'.¹⁵ As the principal instigator of bourgeois-imperialist war, fascism — the Comintern held — was bent on the destruction of the Soviet Union, the citadel of proletarian revolution. It was therefore incumbent on Communists everywhere to defend the Soviet Union, to save humanity from fascist barbarity. For all the anti-war rhetoric, it followed that should fascism embark on a war of aggression against the Soviet Union, proletarian internationalists could not baulk at fighting a 'defensive' war. Within the Communist firmament, 'Peace' to quote Kevin Morgan, 'whatever it did mean, did not simply signify the opposite of war'.¹⁶

Since fascism represented the power of finance capital itself, it could be found in many different guises, adapting almost chameleon-like to the national peculiarities of any capitalist country. If in Germany and Italy, where bourgeois democracy had clearly broken down, fascism was identified with reactionary dictatorship and massed ranks of brown or black shirts, elsewhere it involved the '*transformation of bourgeois democracy from within* — the development of new forms of intensified capitalist dictatorship and increasing restriction of democratic rights'.¹⁷ The struggle against fascism, as one US Communist proposed, 'is not a thing of waiting until some Hitler arrives on the scene and marches down to Washington',¹⁸ or as another, invoking Greek legend put it, 'such a movement does not spring full-grown from Jupiter's forehead'.¹⁹ 'In order to win popular support', fascism 'must appeal to the ideals and slogans in which most Americans still believe — to liberty and freedom. It must even pronounce itself anti-fascist', opined a CPUSA study on the 'peril' of fascism.²⁰ Fascism, in other words, was the menace with many tentacles,

This is why people who recognize fascism for what it is three or four thousand miles away, frequently fail to identify it when it develops in their own country under their very noses. They mechanically seek to identify fascism by the garments which it wears in other countries and are unable to recognize it when it dons new clothes.

In the United States, for instance, there are many people who on the basis of Sunday-supplement accounts of Hitler and Mussolini refuse to see the growth of fascism, unless it takes the shape of a Man on Horseback riding down Pennsylvania Avenue, or a megalomaniac with a little moustache, making speeches in a big voice [. . .] It does not follow stereotyped formulae. Fascism takes on diverse, and frequently subtle, forms.²¹

A wolf in sheep's clothing, bourgeois democracy in the US and in Britain was assuming more fascistic form by the day. This was the process of *encroaching fascism* that Dutt described, and he warned that it was the precursor to a later and fuller fascist onslaught.²²

This rather muddled analysis, which as Larry Ceplair points out had the undesirable effect of 'diffusing the specific demonism of Fascism by applying it indiscriminately',²³ resulted in both Communist parties beating out a somewhat erratic rhythm on the anti-fascist drum. Since finance capital remained the 'true enemy', not only had workers to be vigilant against openly fascist, semi-fascist, or potential fascist organizations, they also had to guard against the incipient 'fascist' tendencies that were developing from *within* the ruling capitalist elite of bourgeois democracy itself.

Hence the CPUSA declared that by imitating the corporatist approach of Fascist Italy, by intervening in labour disputes, by reducing wages, by increasing munitions spending, Roosevelt's New Deal showed all the signs of encroaching fascism.²⁴ In the words of Earl Browder, general secretary of the CPUSA, Roosevelt's National Recovery Administration (NRA) was the 'American brother to Mussolini's "corporate state"'.²⁵ During the summer of 1933, the CPUSA's *Daily Worker* had illustrated the symbol of the NRA — a blue eagle — with a swastika in its claws. This was not to say that the New Deal was fascist, but it was certainly heading in that direction.²⁶ Yet when Roosevelt was later attacked by the 'patriotic' right, the CPUSA embraced the New Deal — a position which, according to Fraser Ottanelli, was not the result

of any directive from Moscow.²⁷ ‘The American Communists never characterized Roosevelt’s New Deal as fascism’, the *Daily Worker* improbably declared on 8 August 1935. With Roosevelt’s re-election in 1936, the CPUSA was insisting that the real fascist danger came not from Roosevelt, or the New Deal wing of the Democratic Party, which followed, ‘in the main, a democratic and anti-fascist program’.²⁸ In fact, in a remarkable about-face, following his famous ‘Quarantine’ speech of October 1937, Roosevelt had, at this moment, become ‘the most outstanding anti-fascist spokesman within capitalist democracies’.²⁹

The fascist threat now came from the Republican Party, backed by the press magnate William Randolph Hearst — the ‘symbol of the blackest reaction in America’, in Browder’s words.³⁰ The fascist forces were those seeking to undermine Roosevelt’s progressive coalition. But this covered an impossibly wide spectrum³¹ that also included populist demagogues such as the anti-Semitic pretender to Huey Long’s throne, the Reverend Gerald K. Smith, as well as the Catholic radio priest and fellow anti-Semite Father Coughlin; violent strike-breaking and vigilante organizations, with antecedents in the KKK, such as the racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-Catholic Black Legion; organizations that deployed more legal methods of propaganda to initiate and support anti-labour legislation, such as the Liberty League and the veterans organization, the American Legion; through to openly fascist and Nazi organizations, such as the Friends of New Germany (later, the German-American Bund), William Dudley Pelley’s Silver Shirts, and the principal intellectual exponents of US fascism, Lawrence Dennis and Seward Collins.³² The lack of any real differentiation between fascists and right-wing conservatives made the fascist threat far too broad-spectrum and not surprisingly, such ‘hysterical prophecies about the coming of fascism’ gave rise to derision amongst CPUSA critics.³³

In much the same way as the CPUSA had originally identified Roosevelt with fascism, so the CPGB maintained that Britain’s National Government was preparing the ground for fascism through its Unemployment Bill, its Incitement to Disaffection Bill, and through increasing restrictions of the rights to free speech, such as banning meetings of the unemployed at labour exchanges. ‘Every day the policy of the National Government takes on a more Fascist character. Fascism does not descend from the clouds. It is prepared, carefully and cunningly, often beneath a mask of “democracy”’.³⁴ The National Government already constituted ‘a virtual dictatorship of British capitalism’, one far-left critic had decided by March 1934.³⁵ As for Mosley’s Blackshirts, they constituted the second line of defence for finance capital — a ‘reserve weapon of the bourgeoisie’. Britain’s other fascist organizations, such as the rabidly anti-Semitic Imperial Fascist League, were dismissed as being of minor importance.³⁶ What followed was that the anti-fascist struggle should be directed in the first instance against the National Government, and then Mosley. As one Communist Party leaflet clarified, ‘The Baldwin Government is the main enemy of the people, the Blackshirts their hangers-on’.³⁷

Significantly, on both sides of the Atlantic, Communists confused fascism with what they understood as the ‘reactionary’ measures of the bourgeois-democratic state. Needless to say, such ill-defined analyses that equated fascism (or at least ‘fascization’) with the National Government, Roosevelt’s administration (or later, the heterogeneous ‘reactionary’ forces opposed to Roosevelt’s progressive coalition) failed

to resonate with wider public opinion. The problem for both Communist parties was that their poorly differentiated (and at times inconsistent) analyses did not make people 'sufficiently familiar with the fascist beast to recognize its odor, no matter how silent its tread'.³⁸ In both countries the public tended to view fascism not as some conspiracy of finance capital but as a foreign creed. In the British case, the BUF was an imitative derivative of Mussolini's and Hitler's fascism; the deployment of political violence by Mosley just 'wasn't cricket'.³⁹ Across the Atlantic, fascism was deemed 'un-American', a specifically European virus characterized by 'brown or black shirts, with clicking heels and marionette salutes'.⁴⁰ Accordingly, 'shirt' movements that were obviously modelled on European fascism, such as the Friends of New Germany, were passed over as unpatriotic and unimportant. In any case, by the end of the 1930s fascism and communism had amalgamated into foreign 'totalitarianism' in most American minds.⁴¹ This increasingly included those non-Communist anti-fascists who argued that the CPUSA were not true anti-fascists because 'true anti-Fascists must be antitotalitarian as well'.⁴²

On Hitler's rise to power the Comintern had called on Communist parties to form a united front of all working-class organizations against fascism, war and reaction. Yet both the CPUSA and CPGB continued to give voice to 'social-fascist' rhetoric. This is perhaps unsurprising given that as late as December 1933 the Comintern was still denouncing Social Democracy as reformist capitalism and castigating Social Democrats as 'social fascists'. In 1933, in response to their refusal join a united front with the Communists, Dutt berated the leaderships of both the Labour Party and TUC for directly assisting the development of capitalist democracy to fascism.⁴³ And, despite the fact that theory of 'social fascism' seemed more applicable to Europe — where social-democratic parties were strong and constituted a major obstacle to working-class unity — rather than the US, Browder continued to denounce the Socialist Party (SP) leader, Norman Thomas, and the bureaucracy of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) as 'social fascists' at least until spring 1934.⁴⁴

At its Seventh World Congress held in Moscow in August 1935, the Comintern called for the forging of People's Fronts. The new 'Popular Front' line that emerged followed recognition of both the serious threat that Nazi Germany posed to the Soviet Union, and by recent events in France where a united front was fast developing into a broader anti-fascist People's Front.⁴⁵ Both the CPUSA and CPGB, which had already taken steps towards forming broader anti-fascist alliances, fell into line with the Comintern's insistence that an essential precondition for any 'People's Front' in their own countries had to be a united front of working-class organizations. Whilst for Communist parties elsewhere this change of Soviet tack could prove problematic, according to Ceplair, 'Earl Browder (CPUSA) and Harry Pollitt (CPGB) applied it without hesitation, mainly because they had the least to lose (their parties were very small and they had no other practical means of attracting new members)'.⁴⁶

The focal point for the development of the 'People's Front' in the US would be a reconstituted Farmer-Labor Party, which was entirely predicated on unity of action between the SP and the CPUSA. Such a party, the Comintern's general secretary Georgi Dimitrov insisted, '*would be a specific form of the mass People's Front in America [...] neither Socialist nor Communist. But it must be an anti-fascist party and must not be an anti-Communist party*'.⁴⁷ But unity of action with the SP was not

easy when, as one CPUSA stalwart pointed out, 'The "old guard" Socialists are against the united front on principle'.⁴⁸ As Browder said, this 'requires the isolation and defeat of that little group of stubborn Old Guard leaders who ride the Socialist movement like an old man of the sea, choking its development, keeping it in opportunist, sectarian isolation [. . .]'.⁴⁹ As soon as unity of action had been achieved with those SP militants willing to break with their reformist leaders, CPUSA strategy, as envisaged from Moscow, would broaden the Farmer-Labor Party into a mass-based 'People's Front' capable of driving a wedge between the liberal and conservative wings of the Democratic Party. Anti-fascism had a decisive role to play in promoting this political realignment. Popular opposition to war and fascism would draw people closer to the party, removing obstacles to wider Communist influence, and thereby integrate it into the American mainstream. For many years the CPUSA had been largely an organization of foreign-born workers, disconnected and alienated from American political culture.

In Britain, the turn to Popular Front politics led the CPGB down the blind alley of seeking affiliation to the Labour Party, a party that it had hitherto assailed as Britain's 'third capitalist party'. For the CPGB, inflicting defeat on the National Government had to take precedence if the momentum towards war and fascism were to be stopped. The return of a Labour government in 1935, it now argued, would bring the workers' struggle to an advanced stage. As Dimitrov declared, 'This position of the British Communists is a correct one. It will help them to set up a militant united front with the millions of members of the British trade unions and Labor Party'.⁵⁰ Yet for Labour Party leaders, cooperation with Communists was out of the question.⁵¹ As Caroline Knowles appreciated, stopping 'the United Front was more significant (to Labour) than the political forces it was designed to counter'.⁵² The story of the CPGB's ill-fated campaign for Labour Party affiliation is of course well known and need not be repeated here.⁵³ What matters is that during the 1930s, for both Communist parties, anti-fascism was considered inseparable from the broader political struggle.

Building (or not building) united anti-fascist fronts

It is often forgotten that well before Hitler's rise to power Communists in the US had already initiated anti-fascist alliances. During the 1920s, in response to the formation of *Fascisti* in Italian-American neighbourhoods,⁵⁴ the Italian-American left provided the first anti-fascists in the US and 'unleashed one of the first anti-Fascist campaigns in the Western world'.⁵⁵ The principal battleground was New York City where Italian radicals formed a tightly knit group of vocal and belligerent anti-fascists, but the fascist/anti-fascist conflict reached other cities on the Atlantic seaboard, notably Philadelphia and Boston.⁵⁶ In April 1923 some seventy-five delegates met at the Italian Chamber of Labor Auditorium in New York City, opposite the national headquarters of the *Fascisti*, and formed the Anti-Fascist Alliance of North America.⁵⁷ This organization, an alliance of Italian labour leaders, communists, socialists, syndicalists, and anarchists, promised 'an insistent and unflagging campaign to enlighten American public opinion on the nature and goals of Fascism in Italy and America'.⁵⁸ The Italian-American radical press, Italian-language newspapers such as the socialist

Il Nuovo Mondo (*The New World*), the communist *Il Lavoratore* (*The Worker*), and the anarchist *Il Martello* (*The Hammer*), supported the cause.

Sectarian disagreements between Communists and Socialists ensured that this coalition quickly disintegrated. Socialists pulled out following claims that Communists had increased their delegate strength by establishing fictitious branches. An alternative organization, the Anti-Fascist League for the Freedom of Italy was founded, with former Socialist presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs as honorary chair.⁵⁹ But this organization proved short-lived. Meanwhile the Anti-Fascist Alliance survived without the Socialists, fronted by the flamboyant anarchist Carlo Tresca, editor of *Il Martello*.

From the outset, a militant physical force policy was adopted, occasioning a series of violent fascist/anti-fascist confrontations. This street conflict resembled an 'urban guerrilla war' with headquarters, newspaper offices, and rallies attacked on both sides.⁶⁰ As Pellegrino Nazzaro describes it, 'From 1923 to 1930, struggles between Fascists and anti-Fascists were not limited to verbal or journalistic disputes. On the contrary, destruction of property, physical assault, and even murders and open war took place between the two opposing factions'.⁶¹ In 1925, six men were stabbed after forty *Fascisti* stormed an anti-fascist meeting in Newark.⁶² In September 1926, two *Fascisti* were killed when a bomb exploded prematurely in a car close to an anti-Fascist meeting in Harlem. The explosion decapitated one man, and blew the legs and arms off another.⁶³ The following year, in May 1927, an anti-fascist was stabbed in the back in Brooklyn. Later that month two *Fascisti* were murdered on their way to a Memorial Day parade in Manhattan.⁶⁴ In July 1932 an anti-fascist took a .32 calibre bullet to the back of the head in a shooting in Staten Island that was blamed on a fascist/anti-fascist feud that dated back to 1925.⁶⁵ Over a dozen people were possibly killed as a consequence of violent encounters between Italian-American fascists and anti-fascists.⁶⁶

By the end of the 1920s, Communists had secured control over the Anti-Fascist Alliance, which had become, to all intents and purposes, a *de facto* branch of the Communist Party. The anarchist Tresca distanced himself from it, and finally, in January 1932, pronounced it dead. Weakened by the secession of more moderate elements, and by the Italian government's decision at the end of 1929 to disband the American *Fascisti*,⁶⁷ the Anti-Fascist Alliance was all but defunct. For Madeline Goodman, 'no side gained much in these public confrontations'.⁶⁸ It was an insignificant 'foreign' conflict played out on American soil that served only to question the 'Americanness' of Italian immigrants. If it impacted on the wider American public, it probably reinforced existing prejudices towards Italian-Americans, 'a lot of cattle that are not fit to live in our decent country'.⁶⁹ On Tresca's assassination in 1943, the *New York Times* commented that he had 'carried on a one-man war against Fascism long before the rest of the United States joined him'.⁷⁰

Since this first anti-fascist front did not extend much beyond Carlo Tresca and a small group of Italian-American radicals, it never assumed particular strategic importance for the Communist Party.⁷¹ It was not until Hitler's rise to power in 1933 that anti-fascism became a far more pressing concern. Of much greater significance was the effort the CPUSA invested in the American League Against War and Fascism. Even though it became the largest anti-fascist organization in the United States, the League remains under-researched, particularly from the standpoint of the CPUSA.⁷²

The immediate precursor to the American League against War and Fascism had been the American Committee for Struggle Against War, formed in the summer of 1932 following the Amsterdam World Congress Against (Imperialist) War, sponsored by the French Communist Henri Barbusse.⁷³ In September 1933, at the St Nicholas Arena in New York City, the American Committee held the first US Congress Against War, presided over by Barbusse and attended by 2616 delegates from thirty-five different states. It was at this Congress that the American League Against War and Fascism was launched. Of the fifty-one organizations that sponsored this first US Congress, thirty-five were said to be under Communist control.⁷⁴ The SP did not participate but many members of the party attended as delegates of other organizations.⁷⁵ Browder could report to the Thirteenth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Comintern that this Congress had been 'led by our Party quite openly'.⁷⁶

At the launch of the American League, Dr J. B. Matthews, a member of the SP, was selected first national chair, Earl Browder was vice-chair, whilst the CPUSA's Donald Henderson ran the national office in New York. According to Matthews's testimony to the Dies Committee, he had been chosen deliberately by Browder in order to win the SP over to this new united front. Once Matthews had secured their participation, the tactic, he claimed, was to drive the SP's 'reformist' leaders out of the united front but to retain the involvement of rank-and-file Socialists. But in protest at a mass Communist-Socialist brawl at an anti-fascist meeting at Madison Square Garden on 16 February 1934, Matthews resigned the chair of the League.⁷⁷ He claimed that Browder had assumed full responsibility for this 'disgraceful affair' without any hesitation whatsoever.⁷⁸ The Madison Square Garden meeting, organized by SP leaders in cooperation with a number of AFL unions, had been called to protest at the treatment of workers in Austria. According to one contemporary critic,

Communists and Socialists flew at each other's throats, the police intervened, and the cause of the united front received an almost fatal blow. While the American League as such took no part in his melee, organizations which play a dominant role in the American League, particularly the Communist Party, were responsible for the disruption of this well-attended anti-fascist rally.⁷⁹

Since none of these resignations were based on the actions of the League, the departures of Matthews and others were dismissed as 'pure and simple desertions'.⁸⁰

To its detractors, the American League was a Communist *front*, controlled and dominated by the CPUSA for Communist purposes. In the wake of the Madison Square Garden affair, the League responded to allegations that it was a front for the CPUSA by insisting that it 'is not and will not be dominated by one political party. No majority in any committee now does or will represent any political party'.⁸¹ The Communist Party Opposition — the dissident group led by Jay Lovestone — was clear in its mind, "Leagues Against War and Fascism" etc. [...] are not as they pretend to be, united fronts of working-class organizations for common aims, but Communist-controlled organizations [...] second class parties for second-class citizens under the control of a first class fraction'.⁸² While the CPUSA did not form a majority, in 1934 just short of fifty per cent of members on the League's National Executive Committee were CPUSA members (although this figure did fall to around

one-quarter by 1936).⁸³ What is more, the CPUSA was the only political party to affiliate to the League and many organizations that also affiliated, such as International Labor Defense and the International Workers' Order, were Communist-controlled. The League's analysis of fascism also chimed unmistakably with that of the CPUSA.⁸⁴ If there was a distinctive 'American' contribution to the League's analysis of fascism it was to give greater prominence to anti-black racism rather than anti-Semitism.⁸⁵

In order to keep liberals, pacifists, and other leftists in the League, Dr Harry Ward, a professor at the Union Theological Seminary in New York, a Methodist and national chair of the American Civil Liberties Union, had replaced Matthews by March 1934. At the same time League missives insisted that it should not be used as a feeder for political parties. The sale of literature by member organizations was prohibited at League meetings; banners and the singing of songs characteristic of party meetings were also embargoed. 'The issue of class war', it declared, 'lies outside the scope of the League's program'.⁸⁶ But this did not stop the CPUSA recruiting through the League. Between October 1934 and May 1935, for instance, the CPUSA in New York City brought in around two hundred members directly through the League.⁸⁷ The National Bureau of the League had to once again remind local CPUSA units in July 1935 that only literature published by the League was permitted to be sold or circulated at League meetings.⁸⁸

Assisted by money-raising speaking tours from Henri Barbusse; John Strachey, organizer of the Coordinating Committee for Anti-Fascist Activity in London; and Lord Marley, radical Labour Party Chief Whip in the House of Lords, and chair of Willi Münzenberg's World Committee for the Victims of German Fascism, the League quickly developed momentum. By 1936 it claimed a membership over three million strong.⁸⁹ However, this figure was arrived at through counting the membership of affiliate organizations (as well as the membership of League branches). The number of individual dues-paying members was less than 10,000 at the end of 1936⁹⁰ rising to 19,857 by the end of 1938.⁹¹ New York City was a particular stronghold. By September 1934 the League could boast 30 branches in the city with an enrolled membership of 2000.⁹² As of May 1937, the largest League memberships were to be found in New York City (4901), Philadelphia (568), Chicago (443), Los Angeles (439), and Pittsburgh (322).⁹³

It is important, though, not to give too much weight to the extent of CPUSA domination. After all, in 1936, even after exhortations by the CPUSA leadership to stream in under the banner of the American League,⁹⁴ only 4.3 per cent of CPUSA members were also members of the League (some 1750, or so).⁹⁵ At the end of 1939, the absolute number of CPUSA members in the League had changed little, comprising around ten per cent of the total League membership.⁹⁶ Indeed, internal CPUSA documents from mid-1934 reveal that the League was a very loose organization, with inactivity on the part of CPUSA members a major problem:

[...] on the one hand, they have committed opportunistic mistakes, submitting themselves to maneuvers of the liberal elements, on the other they have taken sectarian positions, which prevent the broadening both of the united front and of the struggle against fascism and war. [...] We must stop the procedure of some of the districts, which looking upon the League as an extra burden upon the Party, are assigning anyone to this important task, or assign those forces that cannot be utilized in other fields of work.⁹⁷

The CPUSA was desirous that the League should reach out to rank-and-file local branches of the SP, working-class youth, African-American organizations, women's organizations, student organizations, Church congregations, and AFL unions. Above all, the CPUSA wanted to extend the League beyond halls and the press, to reach workers in the factories.⁹⁸ One of the CPUSA's major weaknesses was its failure to root its organization in the workplace. In 1933 just four per cent of party members were organized in shop units.⁹⁹ In the approach to Second Congress of the League, the CPUSA urged its members to become the League's 'driving force' by ensuring that one or two of the most qualified party leaders were put into the League in every locality. This, it felt, would ensure the reorientation of the League towards a more working-class constituency.¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, the vast majority of individual members continued to hail from professional, liberal, and petty-bourgeois backgrounds. A similar pattern obtained for CPUSA membership. According to Ottanelli, 'the highest number of new recruits were professionals and white-collar workers possibly attracted by the Party's militant anti-fascism'.¹⁰¹ Even in its stronghold of New York City the League apparently failed to secure a significant foothold amongst trade unions.¹⁰² Despite a determined effort to increase participation from trade unions, less than 14 per cent of the delegates to the League's Congress in 1936 represented trade unions. As the proceedings of the first national conference of American League secretaries reported in August 1936, 'The majority of unions are as yet too prejudiced toward the middle class, and the American League specifically, to enter wholeheartedly into the framework of the League'.¹⁰³

In 1937 the League was re-named the American League for Peace and Democracy. 'The name was changed to allow for wider representation and the drive to secure a larger individual membership'.¹⁰⁴ According to Harry Ward, attempts to broaden the League's membership were a response to grassroots forces. 'Instead of following them, I should say that the Comintern was following us and the French movement', he maintained.¹⁰⁵ Yet this change of name also corresponded to the Communist Party's 'Democratic Front' strategy whereby the CPUSA endeavoured to appeal to the widest possible progressive constituency by portraying fascism as an attack on patriotic — i.e. Jeffersonian — *democratic* rights. This was a re-working of the old People's Front strategy without limiting the United Front to the Farmer-Labor Party. The Farmer-Labor policy had become an increasingly unrealistic proposition, especially following the demise of the Socialist Party in the wake of the 1936 elections. In order to advance this broader Democratic Front strategy — apparently initiated by Browder and later endorsed by the Comintern — the CPUSA formally disaffiliated from the League, although Communists retained their place in the League as individuals.¹⁰⁶ Direct financial contributions from the CPUSA to the League also continued. These approximated to between \$2000 and \$3000 annually, a sum that was previously paid as an affiliation fee.¹⁰⁷

For Ottanelli, by the end of the 1930s, against the backdrop of international events, the League had become an 'effective vehicle' for collective security, establishing contacts with several influential Congressmen and members of Roosevelt's cabinet. For the most part, the League's anti-fascism was now being channelled into calls for international cooperation against fascist aggression abroad, and against appeasement.¹⁰⁸ When it came to domestic fascism, as Paul Buhle points out, 'Antifascist mobilization fell to others, such as the Socialist Workers Party, able to call

successfully for demonstrations against mass meetings of the German-American Bund in New York and elsewhere'.¹⁰⁹ The mortal blow came in August 1939 when the Nazi-Soviet Pact rendered the League's identification of anti-fascism with pro-Sovietism unsustainable. The sixth annual parade of the American League held in August 1939, where attempts were made to defend the Nazi-Soviet pact, was poorly attended.¹¹⁰ A wave of resignations followed: perhaps as many as one thousand members per month. The League was finally disbanded in February 1940, although attempts were made to revive it as a series of Peace Associations. The SP, which at both the national level and across most states had remained outside the League, ridiculed this move as a sorry attempt by the CPUSA to 'rebuild their fallen American League for War and Hypocrisy'.¹¹¹

As in the US, Communist anti-fascism in Britain pre-dated the 1930s. Small groups of Communist militants were already disrupting meetings of Britain's earliest fascist organization, the British Fascists, during the 1920s.¹¹² But in contrast to the experience in New York City, the appearance of organized fascism within London's Italian communities in the 1920s did not turn them into fascist/anti-fascist battlegrounds.¹¹³ Owing to its specific occupational profile and size, there was no Anglo-Italian labour movement to speak of, and anti-fascist exiles tended to gravitate more to France or the US than Britain. There was a virtual absence of opposition.¹¹⁴ It was home-grown fascism that caught the attention, and the CPGB was quick to organize opposition to Mosley. Prior to the founding of the British Union of Fascists in 1932, Communists had already actively opposed the 'incipient fascism' of Mosley's New Party, sometimes violently.¹¹⁵ Yet despite the CPGB's anti-fascism being at a more advanced stage of development than any other organization on the left, it was still unable to forge a national anti-fascist organization comparable to the American League Against War and Fascism. As a result, anti-fascist activity in Britain during the 1930s tended to express itself through a loose and rather nebulous patchwork of local united front anti-fascist committees.

In 1934, when support for Mosley's Blackshirts was at its peak, an attempt to establish an all-inclusive anti-fascist front was made. In the wake of the counter-demonstration to Mosley at Olympia in June 1934, the CPGB brought together a Coordinating Committee for Anti-Fascist Activity/ies. Its aim was to coordinate the developing movement against fascism in the direction of a united front. The Committee was chaired by John Strachey, who, like Matthews and Ward in the US, fell within the Communist orbit but apparently never joined the Communist Party. Strachey was Treasurer of the British Anti-War Movement — the British branch of Henri Barbusse's World Committee Against War and Fascism (the American League constituted the US branch). This Coordinating Committee also counted CPGB general secretary Harry Pollitt as a member.

By organizing mass working-class opposition to Mosley's rally in Hyde Park on 9 September 1934, the Coordinating Committee thought that it could break Labour's ban on the united front,

Olympia was no solitary battle: it was an act of high revolutionary significance [...] It marked not only a smashing defeat of the decadent hirelings of capitalism; it marked something more important still — the rapid growth of the anti-Fascist fighting United Front [...] September 9 was the biggest break through ever made against the ban on the United Front imposed by Labour leaders.¹¹⁶

Yet, despite an impressive turn-out by thousands of London workers in Hyde Park on 9 September 1934, the CPGB failed to build a permanent united front anti-fascist organization in its wake.

One plan had been to stage a major meeting at the Albert Hall followed by a national anti-fascist congress at which an organization could be launched with the CPGB 'right in the middle', 'giving the drive'.¹¹⁷ Dutt had penned an article for the American League's publication, *Fight*, published in November 1934, which had made reference to the summoning of 'a nation-wide Anti-Fascist Congress to constitute the Anti-Fascist Front'.¹¹⁸ But no such nationwide Congress took place. Another plan, proposed by Strachey, had been to secure the election of militant delegates to an all-London conference on fascism that had been called by the London Labour Party and London Trades Council on 22 September 1934. Strachey thought that this could offer the platform from which a national anti-fascist movement could be launched. But Communists were deemed ineligible to attend.¹¹⁹ The argument which finally won out, supported by Strachey, was that it would be best to build up a concentration in the localities first, and then use this as the basis for a national body. The problem, however, was that the anti-fascist activity focused on Mosley all too quickly fell away and by the end of 1934 the opportunity was lost. To make matters worse, Strachey departed for the US at the end of 1934 to help build the American League. Even after he returned from the US in 1935 'with reports of the serious, widespread and clear sighted struggle against War and Fascism which is being organized in America', the initiative stalled.¹²⁰ Strachey appears to have brought little back to Britain in terms of organizing the struggle against Mosleyite fascism. Although the Coordinating Committee for Anti-Fascist Activity was briefly revived in March 1936 to coincide with a meeting that Mosley held at London's Albert Hall, Strachey became pre-occupied with the Left Book Club, which according to Michael Newman, was the most successful Popular Front movement in Britain, garnering some 57,000 members.¹²¹

Into battle? Communist anti-fascism and political violence during the 1930s

From the documentary record, it is all too clear that the American League did not see political violence forming any part of its tactical repertoire. In instructions on how to deal with fascist meetings in their communities, the League stressed to its local organizations that 'No effort whatsoever should be made to disrupt or otherwise break up any of these meetings because such action will alienate the sympathy and support of those we wish most to enlist'; 'If a convention under Fascist leadership is planned, send a delegation. Speeches and general agitation accompanying the sending of this delegation should be carefully organized so as not to antagonize the membership'.¹²² Where fascist meetings did take place, they should be picketed, 'Picketing alone should be the tactic for protest'. Heckling was encouraged, provided that it only occurred during the question period. Where possible, counter-meetings should be held nearby. Even when fascists attempted to disrupt League meetings, it was felt that it was better to meet their interruptions with argument rather than to eject them.¹²³ As the League said, it did not bar the lawful right of any group to meet. 'Our job',

it declared 'is to educate and organize the potential fascists that they will not follow the would-be fascist dictators of America'.¹²⁴

This is not to say that opposition to such would-be dictators could not take more violent form. Meetings by the Friends of New Germany in the metropolitan area of New York could often trigger fascist/anti-fascist confrontation. At one meeting in Queens in April 1934, there were eighteen brawls, six of them minor riots, engaging ten to twenty men each in the streets surrounding the meeting hall. Contemporary press reports speak of a couple of hundred Communists, 'members of the Anti-Fascist League of Brooklyn', circulating among the crowd. Fifty men, 'said to be Communists', 'staged sorties' at the rear of the fascist procession.¹²⁵ Yet for the most part, rather than being Communist-inspired, violent opposition to German-American Nazis, at least in New York and Newark, originated from so-called 'Minute Men'. These were ad hoc groups of working-class first and second-generation Eastern European Jews that were drawn from local boxing and criminal fraternities, organized not by Communists but by the Jewish War Veterans League.¹²⁶ When it came to German-Americans, shortly after the German Bureau of the CPUSA had attempted the Nazi seizure of power to raise opposition to German-American Nazis in the New York district of Yorkville, the heart of the city's German-American community. The German Bureau focused its attention upon the Yorkville German Workers' Club, which had 180 members, of which some twenty-eight or so were Communists. Attempts to establish Anti-Fascist Action, an organization based around the Club, quickly floundered, however. According to internal reports, this was a consequence of insufficient activity, a neglect of SP members, and 'too much of an outspoken Communist character'.¹²⁷

Elsewhere, the experience in Philadelphia is revealing. Here the American League formed the spearhead of the local anti-Nazi campaign. It seems that violent opposition did not feature at all. The League established a Citizens' Anti-Nazi Committee in response to the activities of local Nazi groups. Aside from organizing pickets of Nazi meetings, it effected a boycott of advertisers in the local Nazi newspaper, and an educative campaign, which entailed a series of anti-Nazi radio broadcasts.¹²⁸ On the occasions when Communist anti-fascism did turn violent, it tended to happen under the auspices of organizations independent of the League. In July 1935, forty or so Communists from the Anti-Nazi Federation of New York¹²⁹ boarded the *SS Bremen*, which had docked at Pier 86 on the North River. A number started a riot on board.¹³⁰ The following month members of the American League rioted in Brooklyn. However, this had been provoked not by fascists but by heavy-handed policing. Police had used sticks to break up a snake dance outside a theatre where the League was protesting against the showing of a Hearst newsreel.¹³¹

Although further research is needed, the narrative of Communist anti-fascism in the US during the 1930s is not one suffused with violence. There are obvious reasons why this should be so. In the first place, the CPUSA remained, even in the depths of the Great Depression, isolated from the mainstream. In the wake of the Wall Street Crash, the party had fully expected an era of revolutionary upheaval, but in the 1932 presidential elections, with a quarter of the American workforce unemployed, it could only muster 102,000 votes from the 40 million or so votes cast, compared to close to 900,000 votes for Norman Thomas, the SP candidate. In 1934 the CPUSA had

just 26,000 members, and far more compelling alternatives to the New Deal existed elsewhere, in popular demagogues such as Huey Long and Father Charles Coughlin. Forcefully suppressing fascist meetings only threatened to further isolate the CPUSA from the mainstream, giving the impression that left-wing radicals were anti-democratic, and therefore 'un-American'. In a society where civil liberties ideology and anti-communism were so deeply entrenched, this was something best avoided. Violence ran the risk of fracturing anti-fascist solidarity, of alienating pacifists and liberals in the League which would, in so doing, undermine its credibility as a broad-based, inclusive alliance. In this sense, behaviour was moderated by the rationale of Communist-liberal cooperation. This was truer still for the late 1930s when the League attempted to forge ever broader alliances by calling for the defence of peace and democracy.

Admittedly, the 1920s were different. But if Italian-American communists confronted fascists with fists, clubs, knives, and sometimes even guns, this was largely a conflict imported into the United States from Italy. On the whole, attitudes had been shaped by the society that these radicals had left. Indeed, many Italian radicals had direct experience of *Fascisti* violence in their homeland, and were incensed when *Fascisti* appeared on the streets of Manhattan. Those who had left Italy after the March on Rome were quickly integrated into the New York group of anti-fascists, and this further encouraged more militant patterns of behaviour. 'Though Tresca did not admit it', as Nazzaro says, 'he knew full well the inevitability of violence between Fascists and anti-Fascists in New York City'.¹³²

In Britain, the thorny issue of violence against Mosley's fascists was discussed in the Communist Party's Central Committee as early as December 1932. It was felt that belligerent tactics had backfired on the party when Communists and fascists had engaged in a gang fight at a Mosley meeting in London's St Pancras, and workers in the audience had left the meeting with the impression that Communists had deliberately provoked the violence. At the same time the party was coming under increasing pressure from its own members to establish a workers' defence corps. According to one Central Committee member, across many parts of the country the feeling was that 'when a group of fascists came out we should come out and beat them up'. Whilst the Central Committee was sympathetic to the idea of a defence corps (only as a strictly defensive organization), as Pollitt remarked to the Central Committee in January 1934, 'it will be fatal for us if [...] the Communist Party opposition to Mosley is looked upon by the working class as being in the nature of a brawl and not a real political struggle'. For Pollitt, it required the 'most careful handling in every district' otherwise there will be a 'dog fight', and no discussion between fascism and communism would occur amongst those that the party was seeking to win to its anti-fascist struggle.¹³³

Such caution was echoed in the recommendations that the Coordinating Committee for Anti-Fascist Activity sent out to local anti-fascist groups. With regard to fascist meetings, Strachey recommended 'well-timed and well-informed questions and interjections' rather than merely shouting down the fascist speaker as soon as he speaks. If fascists resorted to physical violence to prevent their exposure, the audience could be relied upon to 'quell such Fascist assaults and to turn Fascist meetings at which the Fascists provoke disorder, into anti-Fascist triumphs'. The emphasis was

on counter-acting Fascist propaganda not through violence but through persuasive argument. The Coordinating Committee recommended the sale and distribution of anti-fascist leaflets and pamphlets at all fascist meetings before later holding anti-fascist meetings either at the close of fascist meetings or on the same site the next evening. It further suggested petitions, town meetings, public protests and deputations to local authorities where fascist rallies were planned. In keeping with the CPGB's analysis of fascism, it concluded that across all its activities, local anti-fascist groups 'should have in mind not only Fascism of the Mosley brand but should continually expose and combat the Fascist methods of the National Government [...]'.¹³⁴

Evidently, not everyone accepted the need for restraint. The CPGB leadership had to make repeated calls on its rank-and-file to abstain from physical confrontations at fascist meetings, especially as violence against Mosley's fascists escalated once the fascists had adopted militant anti-Semitism as official policy. Particular flashpoints were London's East End, Manchester, and Leeds, where the highest concentrations of Jews resided. The Popular Front policy inclined the CPGB leadership to respectable protest rather than violent militancy. Moreover, the CPGB leadership was becoming increasingly concerned that physical disruption of fascist meetings would lead the government to impose public order legislation that may well have an adverse effect on its activities. But at the local level the impact of this policy on everyday anti-fascist activity was limited. The view, particularly amongst young Jewish Communists, was that 'Mosley should be met everywhere with the maximum force available'.¹³⁵ Prior to the Cable Street disturbances in 1936, the CPGB's East London Organizer had urged the secretary of the Stepney Communist Party, Joe Jacobs, to 'keep order: no excuse for the Government to say we, like the BUF, are hooligans'.¹³⁶ The picture that emerges is of central party and district party leaders struggling to assert their authority over rank-and-file members that refused to toe the party line. On 14 October 1936, in the immediate wake of Cable Street, Pollitt conceded that he believed it impossible to dissuade Communists in the East End from demonstrating at fascist meetings: 'They would not surrender the streets to the Fascists'.¹³⁷ After the 1937 London County Council elections, where the BUF polled 17.8 per cent of total votes cast in Bethnal Green (South-West), Stepney (Limehouse), and Shoreditch, the district party claimed that the fascist vote had increased where the tendency to fight fascism 'only by breaking up its meetings was strongest'.¹³⁸ From 1937 onwards, once a faction calling for a change of strategy within Stepney CPGB prevailed, the Communist Party, at least in East London, switched the focus away from physically confronting the fascists to tackling the social and economic grievances that gave rise to BUF support in the first place.¹³⁹ By the late 1930s, as Jon Lawrence has recognized, 'the tide was running fast against political violence even on the margins of the British polity'.¹⁴⁰

There is a danger of making far too much of violence as *the* single most important feature defining the Communist anti-fascist experience in inter-war Britain. Admittedly, between 1934 and the end of 1938, of the 402 fascist meetings recorded in Home Office files, disturbances occurred at over 60 per cent of these meetings. Yet, aside from the obvious fact that there were many occasions when fascist meetings took place without any disorder whatsoever, Communist-organized opposition was

said to have been the primary cause of disturbances at only fourteen per cent of these meetings. Of course, such a figure underestimates the involvement of Communists in these disturbances. Of the 328 recorded arrests at BUF meetings between 1934 and 1938, 79 were Communists, of which 34 (43 per cent) were Jews.¹⁴¹ However, it should also be remembered that, unlike the US, there were no confirmed deaths arising as a consequence of fascist/anti-fascist confrontations. And even where fascism was countered with violence, unlike in Italy or Germany, there was no resort to armed paramilitary groups like the *Arditi del Popolo* or *Rotfrontkämpferbund*. Without any reference to the wider politics of CPGB United or Popular Front policy, Stephen Cullen has suggested that ‘CPGB involvement was such that we may be able to talk about the party having some strategy of political violence that operated nationally throughout the period, or it was the coincidental convergence of local communist tactics’.¹⁴² As we have seen, the first possibility seems wide of the mark, and, in relation to the latter, it fails to appreciate that local tactics (even in the East End, which had the reputation as a hotbed of violence) were subject to variation.

Conclusion

Some obvious points stand out from this comparison. With regard to their shared analysis of fascism, both Communist parties endeavoured to relate it to their own national particularities, and to their own national political cultures. Having assimilated the Comintern’s theoretical frameworks, at first both read far too much into fascism as something much wider than a question of a Mussolini or a Hitler, but a developing trend within bourgeois capitalist democracy before both, reflecting the Comintern’s shift to the Popular Front, recast their anti-fascism into different forms of democratic and progressive rhetoric. This ultimately led the CPUSA to associate with Roosevelt’s New Deal and the best patriotic traditions of American (Jeffersonian) democracy. Hence, for Browder, Communism was ‘the Americanism of the twentieth century’. As Joel Lewis explains, ‘the Comintern and Soviet transitions of 1934–1936 facilitated the construction of a new “democratic discourse” for communists centred on anti-fascism [...] Popular Front propaganda placed considerable emphasis on urging communists to think and act differently in relation to their nation, competing organizations and democratic traditions’.¹⁴³ Operating in a different national context, the CPGB meanwhile did not go as far as embracing the National Government, but did offer its support to the Labour Party as the best guarantor of democratic liberties, and placed its own struggle within the English radical democratic tradition, invoking the Tolpuddle Martyrs, Robert Owen, the Chartists, William Morris, and others.¹⁴⁴

Significantly, this rearticulating of Communist anti-fascism demonstrates quite clearly the resilience of democratic values within both national political cultures. For Dimitrov, who appreciated the strength of the British and American democratic heritage, the victory of British and American democracy was a critical factor in the anti-fascist struggle. Yet it was also true that society never considered *them* essential to the preservation of democracy. The strength of mainstream democratic values in the US and Britain was such that even if both the CPUSA and CPGB became relatively more ‘acceptable’ and achieved greater political recognition — in the space of three years CPUSA membership more than doubled, up to 75,000 by 1938 whilst

CPGB membership also more than doubled, up from 7700 in 1935 to 15,570 in 1938 — they still remained open to the charge that, in spite of all the democratic rhetoric, they represented a fundamentally un-democratic creed that took their orders from Moscow.

As for organizing direct opposition to openly fascist, semi-fascist, or incipient fascist organizations, both Communist parties assumed a leading role. This is no surprise given the profound emotional indignation that Communists felt towards the alleged fascist brutalities that were being meted out on the wider labour movement, especially in Germany where, ‘In the torture chambers, imprisoned anti-fascists are given injections of poison, their arms are broken, their eyes gouged out; they are strung up and have water pumped into them; the fascist swastika is carved in their living flesh’, so Georgi Dimitrov reported to the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in August 1935.¹⁴⁵ In the case of Britain, however, this leading role did not give rise to a national, umbrella-type anti-fascist organization comparable to the American League Against War and Fascism. It is rather ironic that one of the reasons why this should be so was that the figurehead of the anti-fascist movement, John Strachey, was otherwise occupied with assisting in the development of the American League across the Atlantic. And there is little evidence to suggest that he transferred anti-fascist practice in the US to Britain’s shores on his return.

The final point to make is that whilst both parties had a history of confrontational anti-fascism, Communist-organized anti-fascist violence during the 1930s (if not the 1920s) appears comparatively more widespread in Britain than in the US where the CPUSA, from the leadership down to the rank-and-file, concerned not to be deemed too ‘un-American’, remained largely wedded to legalistic notions of democratic citizenship. The CPUSA wanted to present itself as the champion of democracy, not its opponent. As Browder declared in 1936, ‘Some say that we “advocate violence”, that we are conspirators and terrorists, that we are against democracy. That is not true’.¹⁴⁶ This was a claim that he frequently repeated. But for many Jewish Communist militants in Britain, particularly those who populated London’s East End, Mosley’s fascists constituted an immediate and serious threat — the equivalent of those responsible for anti-Semitic pogroms in Eastern Europe.¹⁴⁷ Hence, when it came to countering Mosley’s fascists with violence, there was little incentive to desist.

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Notes

¹ For a discussion of the ‘anti-fascist’ minimum, see N. Copsy, ‘Preface: Towards a New Anti-Fascist Minimum?’, in *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-War Period*, ed. by N. Copsy and

A. Olechnowicz (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010), pp. xiv–xxi.

² See J. A. Lewis, *Youth Against Fascism: Young Communists in Britain and the United States*,

- 1919–1939 (Saarbrücken:VDM Verlag Dr Müller, 2007).
- ³ J. Strachey, *The Menace of Fascism* (New York: Covici, Freide, Inc., 1933), p. 170.
- ⁴ Strachey, *Menace of Fascism*, pp. 170–71.
- ⁵ Strachey, *Menace of Fascism*, p. 172.
- ⁶ R. P. Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution*, 3rd rev. edn (New York: International Publishers, 1935), p. 261. Strachey sent Dutt drafts of his work for comment; see A. Thorpe, ‘The Communist Party and the New Party’, *Contemporary British History*, 23.4 (2009), 477–91.
- ⁷ See, for example, J. Strachey, ‘The Basis of the United Front’, *Fight* (monthly of the American League Against War and Fascism), 1.1 (November 1933); J. Lee, ‘Mosley’s Blackshirts’, *Fight*, 1.5 (March 1934); R. P. Dutt, ‘British Blackshirts’, *Fight*, 2.1 (November 1934).
- ⁸ H. Wilford, ‘The Communist International and the American Communist Party’, in *International Communism and the Communist International 1919–43*, ed. by T. Rees and A. Thorpe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 225.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 231.
- ¹⁰ See J. E. Haynes and H. Klehr, ‘The Historiography of American Communism: An Unsettled Field’, *Labour History Review*, 68.1 (2003), 61–78.
- ¹¹ A. Thorpe, ‘The Communist International and the British Communist Party’, in Rees and Thorpe, *International Communism and the Communist International*, p. 81.
- ¹² See, for example, M. Worley, ‘Courting Disaster? The Communist International in the Third Period’, in *In Search of Revolution: International Communist parties in the Third Period*, ed. by M. Worley (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), p. 15.
- ¹³ For a critical response to those historians who downplay strategic control from Moscow, see, for example, J. McIlroy and A. Campbell, ‘Histories of the British Communist Party: A User’s Guide’, *Labour History Review*, 68.1 (2003), 33–60.
- ¹⁴ Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution*, p. 233.
- ¹⁵ *The Communist* (November 1933), p. 1124.
- ¹⁶ K. Morgan, *Against Fascism and War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 65.
- ¹⁷ Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution*, p. 265.
- ¹⁸ Comments made by *Daily Worker* editor Clarence Hathaway, quoted in D. Rossinow, ‘The Model of a Model Fellow Traveler: Harry F. Ward, the American League for Peace and Democracy, and the Russian Question in American Politics, 1933–1956’, *Peace and Change*, 29.2 (2004), 117–220 (191).
- ¹⁹ Anon., ‘Fascist Tendencies in Cincinnati’, American League Against War and Fascism, n.d., p. 8, Swarthmore Peace Collection, Swarthmore College, Philadelphia: Papers of the American League for Peace and Democracy (hereafter, ALPD papers).
- ²⁰ See A. B. Magil and H. Stevens, *The Peril of Fascism: The Crisis of American Democracy* (New York: International Publishers, 1938), p. 12.
- ²¹ Magil and Stevens, p. 37.
- ²² Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution*, p. 267.
- ²³ L. Ceplair, *Under the Shadow of War: Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Marxists, 1918–1939* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 56.
- ²⁴ See A. Stephanson, ‘The CPUSA Conception of the Rooseveltian State, 1933–1939’, *Radical History Review*, 24 (1980), 161–76. Stephanson suggests that this recognition of the fascist tendencies of the New Deal followed an attack by the Comintern on the CPUSA for not having already identified the New Deal’s fascist features.
- ²⁵ See E. Browder, *The Meaning of Social Fascism: Its Historical and Theoretical Background* (New York: Workers Library Publications, 1933), p. 47.
- ²⁶ F. M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States: From Depression to WWII* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 69.
- ²⁷ Ottanelli, *The Communist Party*, p. 111.
- ²⁸ Magil and Stevens, p. 285.
- ²⁹ In this speech Roosevelt called for a ‘quarantine’ of aggressor nations; see Stephanson, p. 169.
- ³⁰ See E. Browder, *Hearst’s Secret Documents in Full* (New York: Workers Library, 1936), p. 6.
- ³¹ A useful guide to this spectrum can be found in D. I. Warren, ‘Depression Era. Fascism and Nazism in the United States and Canada: Threat to Democracy or Theatre of the Absurd?’, in *Fascism Outside Europe*, ed. by S. U. Larsen (Boulder: Social Science Monographs, 2001), pp. 635–701.
- ³² For biographies of Pelley, Dennis, and Collins, see S. Beekman, *William Dudley Pelley: A Life in Right-Wing Extremism and the Occult* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005); G. Horne, *The Color of Fascism: Lawrence Dennis, Racial Passing, and the Rise of Right-Wing Extremism in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); and M. J. Tucker, *And They Loved Him: Seward Collins and the Chimera of an American Fascism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).
- ³³ See Magil and Stevens, p. 13.
- ³⁴ *Ten Points Against Fascism* (Young Communist League, 1934), p. 13.
- ³⁵ Lee, p. 11.
- ³⁶ Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution*, p. 284.
- ³⁷ J. L. Douglas, *Spotlight on Fascism* (Communist Party of Great Britain, n.d), p. 23.
- ³⁸ Magil and Stevens, p. 13.
- ³⁹ See J. Dack, ‘“It certainly isn’t cricket!”: Media Responses to Mosley and the BUF’, in Copsey and Olechnowicz, *Varieties of Anti-Fascism*, pp. 140–61. The irony is that cricket was apparently among the compulsory sports played at SS officer schools;

- see A. Weale, *The SS: A New History* (London: Little, Brown & Co., 2010).
- ⁴⁰ Magil and Stevens, p. 11.
- ⁴¹ See M. H. Moore, *Know Your Enemy: The American Debate on Nazism, 1933–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 68.
- ⁴² See Ceplair, p. 201.
- ⁴³ See R. P. Dutt, *Democracy and Fascism* (London: Utopia Press, 1933).
- ⁴⁴ See Browder, *Meaning of Social Fascism*, p. 47.
- ⁴⁵ On the development of the Popular Front in France, see J. Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy 1934–38* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), esp. pp. 36–42.
- ⁴⁶ Ceplair, p. 91.
- ⁴⁷ G. Dimitrov, *The United Front: The Struggle Against Fascism* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1938), p. 42.
- ⁴⁸ I. Amter, *Working Class Unity or Fascism?* (New York District: CPUSA, 1935), p. 9.
- ⁴⁹ E. Browder, *New Steps in the United Front* (New York: Workers Library, n.d.), pp. 18–19.
- ⁵⁰ Dimitrov, p. 44.
- ⁵¹ On Labour Party responses to domestic fascism in inter-war Britain, see N. Copey, “Every time they made a Communist, they made a Fascist”: The Labour Party and Popular Anti-Fascism in the 1930s’, in Copey and Olechnowicz, *Varieties of Anti-Fascism*, pp. 52–72.
- ⁵² C. Knowles, *Race, Discourse and Labourism* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 122.
- ⁵³ See, for instance, N. Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1927–41* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985).
- ⁵⁴ See G. Salvemini (edited with introduction by P. V. Cannistraro), *Italian Fascist Activities in the United States* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1977).
- ⁵⁵ L. J. Iorizzo and S. Mondello, *The Italian-Americans* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1971), p. 199.
- ⁵⁶ See, for example, *New York Times*, 28 May 1928 and 29 June 1933. In Boston, the first English language anti-fascist newspaper, *The Lantern*, was founded in 1927. Its purpose was to ‘present the truth concerning Fascism wherever it exists and to do so without any other purpose than that’, 1.2 (December 1927), 8. It ran from the October 1927 to the summer of 1929.
- ⁵⁷ For a report, see *New York Times*, 11 April 1923.
- ⁵⁸ For an overview of the manifesto of the Anti-Fascist Alliance of North America, see P. Nazzaro, *Fascist and Anti-Fascist Propaganda in America* (Amherst, New York: Cambria Press, 2008), pp. 107–09.
- ⁵⁹ See *New York Times*, 1 August 1926 and 3 September 1926.
- ⁶⁰ J. P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 127. Also see P. V. Cannistraro, *Blackshirts in Little Italy: Italian Americans and Fascism, 1921–1929* (West Lafayette, IN: Bordighera Press, 1999).
- ⁶¹ Nazzaro, p. 124.
- ⁶² See Diggins, p. 127.
- ⁶³ See *New York Times*, 13 September 1926.
- ⁶⁴ For reports, see *New York Times*, 23 May 1927 and 31 May 1927. For a more detailed examination of 1927 as a particularly violent year in the fascist/anti-fascist conflict, see N. Pernicone, *Carlo Tresca: Portrait of a Rebel* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005), pp. 183–94.
- ⁶⁵ See *New York Times*, 5 July 1932.
- ⁶⁶ Diggins, p. 128.
- ⁶⁷ See *New York Times*, 23 December 1929. The Fascist(i) League of North America claimed 12,000 members at the point at which it was disbanded.
- ⁶⁸ See M. J. Goodman, ‘The Evolution of Ethnicity: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in the Italian-American Community, 1914–1945’ (PhD thesis, Carnegie Mellon University, 1993), p. 208.
- ⁶⁹ Goodman, p. 208.
- ⁷⁰ *New York Times*, 13 January 1943. Who ordered Tresca’s murder remains a mystery.
- ⁷¹ On Italian Americans and the American Communist Party, see G. Mayer, ‘Italian Americans and the Communist Party’, in *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism*, ed. by G. Mayer and P. V. Cannistraro (London: Praeger, 2003), pp. 205–27.
- ⁷² Fraser Ottanelli, for example, gives just four paragraphs to the League in a chapter devoted to the CPUSA and anti-fascism; see Ottanelli, pp. 173–75. A notable exception is Rossinow, in his ‘The Model of a Model Fellow Traveler’, esp. pp. 187–95.
- ⁷³ The Congress in Amsterdam in August 1932 was attended by 2196 delegates. It was organized by Willi Münzenberg, although ‘officially’ convened by Henri Barbusse and Romain Rolland. The American Committee, which was established in its wake, had sixty members.
- ⁷⁴ See *Doctor Matthews’ Amazing Statement Before the Dies’ Committee Investigating Un-American Activities* (New York: American Immigration Conference Board, Inc., n.d.), p. 19.
- ⁷⁵ See *The Peace Digest* (Fourth Quarter, 1933), p. 23.
- ⁷⁶ Quoted in H. M. Bishop, *The American League Against War and Fascism* (1936), p. 7; ALPD papers.
- ⁷⁷ Matthews rejoined the American League as a member of the National Bureau in 1935 and remained a member until September 1936. He

resigned following a strike at Consumer's Research, a company of which he later became a vice-president.

⁷⁸ *Doctor Matthews' Amazing Statement*, p. 22,

⁷⁹ Bishop, pp. 8–9.

⁸⁰ Communist Party USA, Comintern Records of the CPUSA, Library of Congress, Reel 287, Delo 3700, F46–47.

⁸¹ *Fight*, 1.6 (April 1934), 14.

⁸² Bishop, p. 30.

⁸³ Minutes of the National Executive Committee of the American League Against War and Fascism, 22 April 1934, Communist Party [CP] USA, Comintern Records of the CPUSA, Library of Congress, Reel 287, Delo 3699, F6.

⁸⁴ See 'Manifesto and Program of the American League Against War and Fascism', *Daily Worker*, 11.56, 30 June 1934, 4. Also see *Proceedings of Third US Congress Against War and Fascism*, 3–5 January 1936, p. 17: 'How could we be against fascism without being against capitalism seeing that fascism is an organized expression of capitalism in its declining period?'

⁸⁵ See D. Rossinow, *Visions of Progress: The Left-Liberal Tradition in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 167–68.

⁸⁶ *A Program Against War and Fascism*, American League Against War and Fascism (July 1936), p. 22.

⁸⁷ See Report on Work of the New York City Committee American League Against War and Fascism, October 1934 to May 1935, CP/USA, Comintern Records of the CPUSA, Library of Congress, Reel 300, Delo. 3938, F34.

⁸⁸ See Minutes of the National Bureau of American League Against War and Fascism, 1 July 1935, CP/USA, Comintern Records of the CPUSA, Library of Congress, Reel 330, Delo 3938, F 11. According to the American Legion, Communist publications were frequently sold at League meetings, including the *Daily Worker*, see Anon., *ISMS: A Review of Alien ISMS in the US*, 2nd edn (National Americanism Commission, American Legion, 1937), p. 143.

⁸⁹ This figure is provided by Earl Browder in *Democracy or Fascism, Earl Browder's Report to the Ninth Convention of the Communist Party* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1936), p. 31.

⁹⁰ See *The Amplifier*, monthly newsletter of the American League Against War and Fascism, 3.1 (January 1937), ALPD papers.

⁹¹ *7.5 Million Speak for Peace* (New York: American League for Peace and Democracy, January 1939), p. 36.

⁹² *Fight*, 1.11 (September 1934), 15.

⁹³ *The Amplifier*, 3.5, 1 May 1937. In the proceedings of its Second Congress (Chicago, 28–30 September 1934) the League reported that circulation of its organ, *Fight*, was 28,000–30,000 (with 40 per cent of issues sold in New York City). By January 1936, *Fight* had 7000 subscribers.

⁹⁴ See CPUSA *Party Organizer*, 8.9 (September 1935), 14.

⁹⁵ See CPUSA *Party Organizer*, 9.7–8 (July–August 1936), 9.

⁹⁶ See *Washington Post*, 1 November 1939.

⁹⁷ See 'Political Orientation of the American League Against War and Fascism', CP/ USA, Comintern Records of the CPUSA, Library of Congress, Reel 287, Delo. 3701, F 58.

⁹⁸ See CPUSA, *Party Organizer*, 2.3 (March 1934), 30–32.

⁹⁹ Ottanelli, p. 44.

¹⁰⁰ See 'Political Orientation of the American League Against War and Fascism', F56.

¹⁰¹ Ottanelli, p. 129.

¹⁰² Bishop, p. 36.

¹⁰³ 'Proceedings of the First National Conference of American League Secretaries', Pittsburgh, 28–20 August 1936, p. 6; ALPD papers.

¹⁰⁴ American League for Peace and Democracy press release, 3 December 1937; ALPD papers.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Rossinow, 'The Model of a Model Fellow Traveler', p. 189.

¹⁰⁶ See Report of the Executive Committee of the American League for Peace and Democracy, 1 November 1937; ALPD papers.

¹⁰⁷ See *Washington Post*, 1 November 1939.

¹⁰⁸ See Ottanelli, p. 174.

¹⁰⁹ See 'Antifascism', in *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, ed. by M. J. Buhle, P. Buhle and D. Georgaka (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press), p. 47. For the SWP take on its organization of mass opposition to a Bund meeting at Madison Square Garden in February 1939, see J. P. Cannon, F. Dobbs, V. R. Dunne, J. Hansen, M. Miah et al., *The Fight Against Fascism in the USA* (New York: National Education Department Socialist Workers Party, n.d.), pp. 9–11.

¹¹⁰ See *New York Herald Tribune*, 27 August 1939.

¹¹¹ *The Call*, weekly journal of the Socialist Party, 9 February 1940, p. 4.

¹¹² See N. Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2000), pp. 5–12; and K. Hodgson, *Fighting Fascism: The British Left and the Rise of Fascism, 1919–39* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp. 97–104.

¹¹³ On Anglo-Italian Fascism, see C. Baldoli, *Exporting Fascism: Italian Fascists and Britain's Italians in the 1930s* (Oxford: Berg, 2003).

¹¹⁴ A limited opposition formed around the Italian League of the Rights of Man and Emilio Recchioni,

a businessman who owned a delicatessen shop in Soho. These premises served as a centre of Italian anti-fascist activity in London, with Recchioni apparently leading a London-based plot to assassinate Mussolini, see *History Today*, 49 (April 1999), 2–3.

¹¹⁵ On opposition to the New Party, see N. Copey, 'Opposition to the New Party: An Incipient Anti-Fascism or a Defence Against "Mosleyitis"?', *Contemporary British History*, 23.4 (2009), 461–75; Thorpe, 'The Communist Party and the New Party'; and M. Worley, *Oswald Mosley and the New Party* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010), pp. 118–24.

¹¹⁶ *Drowned in a Sea of Working-Class Activity — September 9th* (Communist Party of Great Britain, 1934), p. 3.

¹¹⁷ See Communist Party of Great Britain Central Committee Minutes, 10 August 1934. People's History Museum, Labour History Archive and Study Centre.

¹¹⁸ See Dutt, 'British Blackshirts', 2.

¹¹⁹ See Copey, 'Every time they made a Communist, they made a Fascist', p. 62.

¹²⁰ Strachey, 'Basis of the United Front'.

¹²¹ See M. Newman, *John Strachey* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 54.

¹²² 'Proceedings of the First National Conference of American League Secretaries', p. 15.

¹²³ See CP/USA, Comintern Records of the CPUSA, Library of Congress, Reel 300, Delo. 3938, F111–12.

¹²⁴ *A Program Against War and Fascism*, p. 23.

¹²⁵ See *New York Times*, 9 April 1934. The CPUSA had established a Red Front Fighters League in 1933 but this organization appears to have been short-lived. In July 1934 the *Party Organizer* (p. 28) warned that it was important to guard against 'the tendency of building some secret defense organizations which are nothing but hot-beds of provocation. The experiences in the Red Front, Red Shirt, etc., were a lesson in this respect'.

¹²⁶ See W. Grover, *Nazis in Newark* (New Brunswick: New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2003), pp. 39–71. On the Jewish War Veterans League, see M. Gottlieb, 'The Anti-Nazi Boycott Movement in the United States: An Ideological and Sociological Appreciation', *Jewish Social Studies*, 35 (July–October 1973), 198–227.

¹²⁷ See CP/USA, Comintern Records of the CPUSA, Library of Congress, Reel 257, Del 3368, F128.

¹²⁸ See 'Report on Anti-Nazi Committee Philadelphia'; ALPD papers.

¹²⁹ The secretary of the Anti-Nazi Federation of New York (ANF) was June Croll (Gordon), a CPUSA member. In 1934 the ANF had marched on the German Consul General's office in New York City

demanding the release of Ernst Thaelmann. In 1935 it focused its campaign on demonstrating against German ships berthed in New York. The CPUSA's line on this anti-Nazi organization was that it duplicated the work of the League, and had no reason for existence.

¹³⁰ See *New York Times*, 2 August 1935.

¹³¹ See *New York Times*, 11 August 1935.

¹³² Nazzaro, p. 104.

¹³³ Communist Party of Great Britain, Central Committee minutes, January 1934, People's History Museum, Labour History Archive and Study Centre.

¹³⁴ 'Work of Anti-Fascist Groups or Movements', Coordinating Committee for Anti-Fascist Activity circular. The National Archives, MEPO 2 3076–77.

¹³⁵ J. Jacobs, *Out of the Ghetto*, 2nd edn (London: Phoenix Publishers, 1991), p. 205.

¹³⁶ Jacobs, p. 238.

¹³⁷ Quoted by C. Holmes, 'Documents: East End Anti-Semitism, 1936', *Society for the Study of Labour History*, 32 (1976), 27.

¹³⁸ See Jacobs, p. 294.

¹³⁹ See P. Piratin, *Our Flag Stays Red* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1978), pp. 27–32. For a recent analysis of Jewish opposition to domestic fascism in London's East End, see N. Copey and D. Tilles, 'Uniting a Divided Community? Re-appraising Jewish Responses to British Fascist Antisemitism, 1932–39', *Holocaust Studies*, 15.1–2 (2009), 163–87. This article is reprinted in *Fascism and the Jews: Italy and Britain*, ed. by D. Tilles and S. Garau (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2011), pp. 180–206.

¹⁴⁰ J. Lawrence, 'Fascist Violence and the Politics of Public Order in Inter-war Britain: The Olympia Debate Revisited', *Historical Research*, 76. 92 (2003), 261.

¹⁴¹ These figures are tabulated by Stephen Cullen, in S. Cullen, 'Political Violence: The Case of the British Union of Fascists', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 28.2 (1993), 250–51.

¹⁴² Cullen, pp. 263–64.

¹⁴³ Lewis, p. 42.

¹⁴⁴ See T. Linehan, 'Communist Culture and Anti-Fascism in Inter-War Britain', in Copey and Olechnowicz, *Varieties of Anti-Fascism*, pp. 31–51.

¹⁴⁵ See Dimitrov, p. 17.

¹⁴⁶ E. Bowder, 'The Farmer-Labor Party — the People's Front in the USA', reprinted in *The Communist International* (September 1936).

¹⁴⁷ See H. F. Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism 1933–1945* (Ilford: Vallentine Mitchell, 1995), pp. 53–57.

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