

Theory Betrayed

*An Essay on Gabriel Rockhill's Who Paid the Pipers of Western
Marxism?*

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Contents

Introduction: Frankfurt, Moscow, Beijing	5
1 The Kremlin Ball at the Grand Hotel Abyss	11
2 The Frankfurt School: Rockhill’s Critique and Ours	17
2.1 Cultural Marxism Conspiracy Theory	17
2.2 Adorno and Horkheimer	19
2.3 Marcuse, US Intelligence, and the “Compatible Left”	28
2.4 Marcuse, Soviet Marxism, and The New Left	32
3 The Critical Balance Sheet on Actually Existing Stalinism	43
3.1 China	43
3.2 Germany	44
3.3 Spain	46
3.4 France and Its Empire	50
3.5 United States of America	51
3.6 Nazi-Soviet Pact	54
3.7 World War II	56
3.8 Israel-Palestine	64
3.9 Algeria	66
3.10 1968	68
3.11 China – Nixon	70
4 The Prophet Smeared	75
5 The Rockhill-Furr Bloc	83
6 The Primacy of Stalinist Pragmatism	87
7 Mao’s Negative Dialectics	91
8 The Red Guard and the Market Stalinist	97
9 “Socialism From Above”: The Frankfurt School	101
10 MAGA Adornians	105
11 From “Global Class War” to Multipolarity	109

12	The Red-Brown Thread: Why Do Fascists Love Stalin?	113
13	The Unhappy Stalinist Consciousness	127
14	Conclusion: Philosophy, Programme, Party	131

Introduction: Frankfurt, Moscow, Beijing

Since Maurice Merleau-Ponty popularised the phrase “Western Marxism” in the aftermath of the Korean War, it has remained a contentious and slippery term. Perry Anderson attempted to define Western Marxism more narrowly, characterising it by philosophical pessimism, isolation from the workers’ movement, and above all, a sense of political defeat.¹ Yet such a definition excludes many Marxists living in the West from qualifying as “Western Marxists”. For those who do fit the designation, rather than joining a militant party, the doyens of Western Marxism checked into what Georg Lukács once called “The Grand Hotel Abyss”.² This metaphor captures the comfortable, non-threatening, and largely “petty-bourgeois” existence of many left-wing intellectuals who had separated themselves from the gritty realities of class struggle. Instead of meeting the fate of revolutionary thinkers like James Connolly, Che Guevara, Karl Liebknecht or Rosa Luxemburg, they led respectable lives that did not fundamentally disturb the status quo.

With Perry Anderson’s definition in mind, the archetypal Western Marxists of the twentieth century are best exemplified by the first generation of the Frankfurt School, including – though not limited to – Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. Despite their ostensible revolutionary beginnings, these theorists often kept their distance from the working class and mass politics. Over time, this political distance came to be justified by an increasingly conservative theoretical orientation. A young Horkheimer, writing under the alias Heinrich Regius, observed that “a revolutionary career does not lead to banquets and honorary titles, interesting research and professorial wages. It leads to misery, disgrace, ingratitude, prison and a voyage into the unknown, illuminated by only an almost superhuman belief”.³ This statement reads as particularly eerie in light of what Horkheimer later became: fully ensconced in the warm bosom of elite academia. In the case of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, history seems not to be without its sense of irony.

Such criticisms of the Frankfurt School are not new. Nor are they misplaced. Yet a new species of critique has emerged from circles that style themselves “Marxist-Leninist”, though the more accurate label would be neo-Stalinist. Among these critics is Domenico Losurdo, the late Italian scholar and historian of philosophy, who delivered his own verdict on the Frankfurt School in *Western Marxism: How It Was Born, How It Died, How It Can Be Reborn*, published in 2024.⁴ The book reprises many of the criticisms of Western Marxism found

1 See Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1976), 42. For the origins of the term “Western Marxism,” see Nicholas Devlin, “Karl Korsch and Marxism’s interwar moment, 1917–1933,” *History of European Ideas* Vol. 48, No. 5 (2022): 574–593.

2 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 22.

3 Max Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 41.

4 Domenico Losurdo, *Western Marxism: How It Was Born, How It Died, How It Can Be Reborn* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2024a).

in Anderson, but shorn of the latter's original sympathy for Trotsky's alternative to both Stalinism and Adorno. Unlike Anderson, moreover, Losurdo underscores what he sees as Western Marxism's blind spot regarding colonialism, drawing strong attention to what he identifies as its chauvinistic tendencies. Losurdo also casts a much wider net in identifying who is a Western Marxist, extending the category to include even explicit critics of Marx such as Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault. Further, Losurdo's formulation risks losing all conceptual-historical precision when it is expanded to fit revolutionary figures like Leon Trotsky, whom he criticises for harbouring "Eurocentric" tendencies.

Another self-described Marxist-Leninist, Gabriel Rockhill, has advanced his own concept of the "global theory industry", intended in part to supplement Losurdo's criticisms. For Rockhill, it is not enough to criticise contemporary theory at the level of ideas – what he calls an "immanent critique".⁵ Instead, he argues, we must move beyond Adornian *Ideologiekritik* and expose these theorists as pseudo-Marxist agents of imperialism, whether they are on the CIA payroll or explicit Cold Warriors. This, for Rockhill, constitutes a properly "materialist" analysis: an account of how dark money determines consciousness. If Balzac quipped that behind every great fortune is a crime, then for Rockhill, behind every Critical Theorist (with capital letters) stands the bourgeoisie.

Rockhill has gained notoriety with his latest book from Monthly Review Press called *Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism? The Intellectual World War; Marxism Versus the Imperial Theory Industry (Volume 1)* (2025).⁶ The title is a mouthful, and the book ranges widely – from Rockhill's intellectual autobiography in French Critical Theory (under the auspices of Jacques Derrida himself) to the claim that Western Marxism functioned as an ideological front in the Cold War. It also contains extended passages outlining his methodological approach, which he calls "Dialectical and Historical Materialism" (DHM).⁷ Politically, Rockhill in this book does not explicitly call himself a Marxist-Leninist, or a Stalinist, but, instead, embraces the label "anti-imperialist Marxism".⁸ What he calls "Global Marxism," or non-Western Marxism, is theoretically and politically superior to anything coming out of the "imperial theory industry".

Monthly Review Press has announced two additional volumes from Rockhill, which will supposedly demonstrate how the rest of contemporary Left theory serves as a Trojan horse for imperialist interests. Despite the apparent Marxist, socialist, and left-wing credentials of the Frankfurt School – and of French academic luminaries like Foucault and Derrida – they

5 Gabriel Rockhill, "Critical and Revolutionary Theory: For the Reinvention of Critique in the Age of Ideological Realignment," in *Domination and Emancipation: Remaking Critique*, ed. Daniel Benson (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 118.

6 Rockhill's title is a homage to Frances Stonor Saunders book, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, which details CIA involvement with the Congress for Cultural Freedom. See Gabriel Rockhill, *Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism? The Intellectual World War; Marxism Versus The Imperial Theory Industry (Volume 1)* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2025), 61-2.

7 Ibid. 75-80.

8 Ibid. 333.

are all, to cite the Maoist formulation, “left in form, but right in essence”. For Rockhill, this is not merely a problem of ideology, but of the “imperial superstructure”.⁹ Social being has penetrated academic consciousness to such an extent that Critical Theory, whether in its German or French variants, is rendered either useless for activists or, worse, it transforms them into complicit agents of the bourgeois state. From Theodor Adorno to Slavoj Žižek, the rock stars of academic Marxism are, in Rockhill’s view, not your friends. They are, as he puts it, the pied pipers of imperialism.

It is true that much of contemporary theory is hostile to classical Marxism and rejects its central premises. Whether the issue is the dialectics of nature, the labour theory of value, or even the need for an independent Marxist party, relatively few academics working in “theory” today defend these positions. It is no surprise to anyone that the reigning ideas of academia still reflect late capitalism. However, Rockhill goes much further in his claims. His specific accusations about the Frankfurt School’s connections to state agencies should be reviewed and scrutinised carefully. It would be valuable to see how other scholars of the Frankfurt School assess the allegations.

Unfortunately, in his polemical fervour, Rockhill tips his hand as a Stalinist ideologue by manufacturing conspiratorial amalgams. Not only is the Frankfurt School depicted as populated by ex-Nazis, CIA stooges, and the like; Trotsky himself and Trotskyists are cast as collaborators with American imperialism. Anything that appears remotely critical of Stalinism is automatically “fed-jacketed”, and Rockhill asserts a direct Trotskyism-to-CIA pipeline without so much as a footnote to substantiate the claim. Even the Grand Inquisitor of contemporary Stalinism, Professor Grover Furr, would at least provide a citation – however dubious the source – when making such a sweeping allegation.

Even if one were to concede much of Rockhill’s lurid narrative of intrigue, espionage, and betrayal, it fails to explain how the Frankfurt School actually emerged. The Institute of Social Research was in existence before the CIA or OSS were formed, but Rockhill omits one of the most decisive forces shaping Western Marxism: Stalinism itself. Against today’s historical amnesia, Stalinism was not a bulwark against Western imperialism, which even some members of the Frankfurt School believed. On the contrary, to quote Trotsky, it functioned as “an agency of imperialism”.¹⁰ By privileging international stability and domestic peace over revolutionary upheavals, the Stalinist bureaucracy helped stabilise the imperialist system and severely distorted Marxist theory and practice as a consequence.

The Soviet Union was widely regarded as the homeland of socialism and a beacon of hope for the workers across the globe. Nonetheless, the outlook of Stalinist states did not genuinely reflect internationalism, but rather the parochial policy of “socialism in one country”. What passed for pragmatic realism produced betrayal after betrayal of workers’ movements and

9 Ibid. 154.

10 Leon Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), 24.

national liberation struggles for over a century. Movements were sacrificed to the needs of the ruling clique. Even after the fall of the USSR, similar patterns persist in various parties, organisations, and remaining Stalinist states, such as the People's Republic of China (PRC).

While Rockhill details Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse's connections to Western institutions and intelligence agencies – highlighting their accommodation to imperialism, with Horkheimer perhaps as the most glaring case – he neglects to examine how the Frankfurt School accommodated Stalinism in the 1930s. As much as he condemns their compromises, he remains silent about the betrayals of the workers' movement carried out by Soviet Moscow. The resulting narrative is thus incomplete and one-dimensional, drawing heavily on a truncated historical framework reminiscent of Stalin's *Short Course*.

Rockhill's book also obscures how much he shares with his ideological targets. The Critical Theorist who declares that the proletariat has been integrated into bourgeois society by the culture industry is not qualitatively much different than the Stalinist (or Maoist) who dismisses the Western working class as irredeemably bourgeoisified and incapable of revolution. In both cases, the core is condemned in favour of privileging a supposedly revolutionary periphery, even if that periphery is bourgeois, capitalist, and governed by reactionary nationalists. The Critical Theorist who rejects practice as corrupt can converge, paradoxically, with the commissar who reduces theory to the immediate needs of the state bureaucracy. When the self-emancipation of the working class is abandoned, liberation is outsourced – either to Western “progressive” imperialism or to “Actually Existing Socialism”. If Adorno said, “nothing but despair can save us”,¹¹ Rockhill shares in that despair when he aligns himself with the Communist Party of China, which now counts billionaires among its members.¹²

Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, China has become the principal reference point for many Marxist-Leninists. It is hailed as an emerging superpower and harbinger of socialism. Nonetheless the PRC's embrace of market mechanisms, entrenched inequality, and strategic alliances with imperialist states contradicts that image. This uncritical enthusiasm has led theorists such as Losurdo to revise fundamental Marxist categories. Communism is no longer about the abolition of markets or the withering away of the state. Instead, the conservative features of Stalinism – products of poverty, isolation, and civil war – are reified

¹¹ Adorno as quoted in Rockhill 2025, 223.

¹² For billionaire membership in the “Communist” Party of China, see Bloomberg, “Why Communist China Is Home to So Many Billionaires”, *Fortune*, November 29, 2018. <https://fortune.com/2018/11/29/communist-china-billionaires-jack-ma/>; Sui-Lee Wee, “China's Parliament Is a Growing Billionaires' Club”, *New York Times*, March 1, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/01/business/china-parliament-billionaires.html>; In the following clip, Rockhill fails to distinguish between the Western proletariat and the labour aristocracy as a whole. He then extrapolates this to cover the “academic” labour aristocracy, not bothering to distinguish between elite professors and the thousands of poorly paid adjuncts in the same institutions. In many respects, Rockhill's account of the “intellectual labor aristocracy” resembles J. Sakai's *Settlers*, which argues that the entire American working class is irredeemably corrupt and bought off. “The Intellectual Labor Aristocracy W/ Gabriel Rockhill.” n.d. *Youtube*. Accessed April 18, 2026. <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/UrW8RRRepoOs>.

as emancipatory. Elements of Marx's own project, including the main thrust of Lenin's *The State and Revolution*, are criticised as utopian, anarchistic, or even "Bakuninist".¹³

Drawing on the French Revolutionary analogy, Trotsky described the emerging Soviet bureaucracy as not merely counterrevolutionary but *Thermidorian*. After the fall of Robespierre, the Thermidorians of the 1790s merely wore the mask of revolution. They maintained the superficial trappings of Jacobinism, such as the Republican calendar, while rolling back the substance of the Republic of Virtue in favour of a conservative dictatorship of privilege and wealth. Like the Thermidorians after Robespierre, the Stalinist leadership also expropriated popular power, while retaining the symbols of Bolshevism. As Trotsky observed, Soviet officialdom paid formal lip service to international revolution but embraced conservative nationalism in practice.¹⁴

Contrary to Rockhill's presentation, most Western Marxists ultimately accepted this Thermidorian consolidation as a historical fact. None of them agreed with Trotsky's alternative. Even when figures such as Walter Benjamin or Bertolt Brecht expressed sympathy for Trotsky, the dominant view – echoing Lukács – was that "socialism in one country" represented political reality. Trotsky appeared romantic or messianic, incompatible with the "realistic" needs of state building. In this respect, Losurdo and Rockhill are at one with the Western Marxists they criticise. Adorno, Horkheimer, Bloch, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Žižek all rejected permanent revolution. And, in the 1930s, Adorno and Horkheimer themselves adopted accommodationism, offering tacit support to the Soviet Union during the height of the purges.

Finally, when Rockhill criticises the irrationalist features of Western Marxism as inherently imperialist, he neglects to confront irrationalist defences of Stalinism. Bloch's romantic utopianism, for example, lent itself to apologetics for Stalinist orthodoxy. In the 1930s, he did not merely theorise and wax poetic; exhibiting his loyalty in practice, Bloch wrote affidavits for the Moscow Show Trials, trying to prove how the defendants were indeed agents and foreign spies.¹⁵ Irrationalism in late modernity did not flow solely from Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Stalinism was also a major source of irrationalism. Lukács himself conceded after 1956 that the methods of Stalinism led to a destruction of Marxist thinking.¹⁶

13 Domenico Losurdo, *Democracy or Bonapartism* (New York: Verso, 2024b), 320–21.

14 For more on the Thermidorian degeneration of the USSR under Stalin, see Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and Where is it Going?* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972); Douglas Greene, *Stalinism and the Dialectics of Saturn: Anti-communism, Marxism, and the Fate of the Soviet Union* (New York: Lexington Books, 2023), 251–283; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 156–72; Michael Reiman, *The Birth of Stalinism: the USSR on the Eve of the "Second Revolution"* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1987); and Victor Serge, *Russia Twenty Years After* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1996).

15 Ernst Bloch, "Discussing Expressionism", in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: New Left Books, 1977), 15. For more background on Bloch's complicated political trajectory and eventual turn against Stalinism see Greene 2023, 121–23.

16 Georg Lukacs, *The Process of Democratisation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 117–136.

Any critique of irrationalism that omits what Isaac Deutscher called the medieval mentality of Stalinism is woefully incomplete, and continues to launder irrationalism in another pseudo-socialist guise.¹⁷ Today, online subcultures celebrate what Benjamin Noys calls “phantasmagoric Stalinism”, which fetishises the power and cruelty of the General Secretary.¹⁸ There is even something distinctly Nietzschean in this aestheticisation of power under the banner of “Marxism-Leninism”. Neither Losurdo nor Rockhill address this dimension of authoritarian nostalgia. Nor do they confront the far right’s own fascination with Stalin, a disturbing historical phenomenon we will examine below.

To properly address Rockhill’s claims requires not only a direct engagement with his book, but also the development of independent criticism of both Stalinism and the Frankfurt School from a standpoint distinct from these currents. This means analysing how the pessimism of the Frankfurt School emerged in relation to Stalinism, rather than in isolation from it. It also requires drawing up a critical balance sheet of “Actually Existing Socialism”, coming to grips with the tragedy of Stalinism. This means accounting for how Stalinism functioned as a roadblock to socialist and anticolonial struggles, while also undermining the anti-fascist cause. From there, the essay proceeds to evaluate key elements of Rockhill’s neo-Stalinist methodology, while providing a critical overview of the major figures of the Frankfurt School’s first generation. We conclude by advancing an alternative framework for Marxist theory that decisively departs from Rockhill’s approach while avoiding the major pitfalls of the Frankfurt School.

17 See Isaac Deutscher, “Marxism and Primitive Magic”, in *The Stalinist Legacy: Its Impact on Twentieth Century World Politics*, ed. Tariq Ali (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), 95-106.

18 See Historical Materialism: Critical Marxist Theory. “Crisis and Criticism (with Benjamin Noys and Harrison Fluss)”. *YouTube*. May 22, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOyhNac3coo>.

1 The Kremlin Ball at the Grand Hotel Abyss

Emerging in the aftermath of World War I and the isolation of the Russian Revolution, most Western Marxists – at least those typically labelled as such – occupied a middle ground between Stalinism and social democracy. Western Marxists were never a unified group with a coherent political programme. By the 1930s, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse preferred the relative solitude of academia to active political engagement. However, there were also Communist Party militants like Lukács and Antonio Gramsci who remained politically active. As the standard narrative goes since Anderson's *Considerations on Western Marxism* (1976), what these intellectuals shared was a greater emphasis on culture, philosophy, and aesthetics than was found in “Classical Marxism”, with its traditional focus on political economy.¹

Contrary to Rockhill's impression of Western Marxism as uniformly hostile to the Soviet Union, the reality before World War II was far more complex. Anderson noted the following: “It [Western Marxism] never completely accepted Stalinism; it never actively combated it either”.² During the 1920s, the Institute of Social Research was founded independently of both the Comintern and social democracy. But independence did not mean overt hostility toward the USSR. In fact, there was no official position on the Soviet Union, whether positive or negative. When Friedrich Pollock wrote *Experiments in Economic Planning in the Soviet Union 1917 – 1927*, he delicately refrained from declaring explicit support. At the same time, the Institute regretted the division of the working-class movement in Germany between Communists and Social Democrats.³

When Horkheimer became director of the Frankfurt School in 1930, its distance from Marxist orthodoxy increased. In “The Impotence of the German Working Class”, (written in 1927 but only published in 1934), Horkheimer expressed scepticism about the ability of Germany's working-class parties to carry out a proletarian revolution. He remarked that the Social Democrats were unwilling to act, and the Communists unwilling to think.⁴ The catastrophic

1 Rockhill stated that Anderson neglected to discuss the contributions of Third World Marxism in his analysis of Western Marxism: “He [Anderson] praises the innovation of western Marxists for coming up with new ways of thinking and new ways of speaking. not the innovation of Ho Chi Minh, of Mao, of Che and many other examples that one could point to that are innovations – that are theoretical innovations – of the highest possible sort because they have practical implications for elevating the lives of literally millions of people subjected to the most heinous forms of abject immiseration”. Critical Theory Workshop. “Gabriel Rockhill Interviewed by the Marx Memorial Library”. *YouTube*. December 24, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skQI7h3jDUE>.

2 Anderson 1976, 96.

3 A great deal of this section draws upon Greene 2023, 118-120.

4 Quoted in Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923 – 1950* (London: Heineman, 1973), 14.

defeat of the German left in 1933, with the rise of Hitler, only reinforced the Frankfurt School's political pessimism.

After Hitler's triumph, the Frankfurt School was forced into exile. In 1935, Adorno and Horkheimer reestablished the Institute at Columbia University in New York. Despite their relocation to the United States, both remained fixated on European affairs, Marxism, and the USSR. In certain respects, they shared Rockhill's view that the Soviet Union was the only effective anti-fascist force. Adorno wrote in 1936: "In two years at the most, Germany will attack Russia, while France and England stand back on the basis of the treaties which will have been signed by then".⁵

During the Moscow Trials, Adorno was aghast when leading Bolsheviks confessed to fantastic crimes. Writing to Horkheimer after the first trial in August 1936: "Has the planet really and truly gone to Hell?"⁶ But this was a private judgment he did not think should be said publicly. Adorno believed that the Frankfurt School should not openly criticise either Stalin or the Soviet Union lest it damage the antifascist cause. As he told Horkheimer: "The most loyal attitude to Russia at the moment is probably shown by keeping quiet".⁷ But, unlike many fellow-travellers, Adorno's conscience seemed troubled by this silence: "[i]n the current situation, which is truly desperate, one should really maintain discipline at any cost (and no one knows the cost better than I!) and not publish anything which might damage Russia".⁸

Although he agreed with Adorno's need for silence, Horkheimer maintained his own ambiguity toward Stalinism. Despite its crimes, he believed the USSR represented something better than Western capitalism. Even as late as 1956, he stated: "We have nothing in common with Russian bureaucrats. But they stand for a greater right as opposed to Western culture. It is the fault of the West that the Russian Revolution went the way it did".⁹ His 1939 essay "The Jews and Europe" published shortly after the Nazi-Soviet Pact, removed references to the USSR and directed its main thrust against Hitler. In this article, Horkheimer famously argued that fascism was an outgrowth of capitalism: "...whoever is not willing to talk about capitalism should also keep quiet about fascism".¹⁰

We see here that Adorno and Horkheimer occupied a position similar to many fellow travellers and left-leaning intellectuals. During the 1930s – what Victor Serge lamented as "The Midnight of the Century" – they witnessed triumphant counterrevolutions in both Russia and Germany. Yet they also viewed Stalin and the USSR as the only bulwark against the Nazi threat. To that

5 Quoted in Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 162.

6 Quoted in Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 226.

7 Quoted in Wiggershaus 1995, 162.

8 Ibid.

9 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "Towards a New Manifesto", *New Left Review* 65 (Sept-Oct. 2010): 41.

10 Max Horkheimer, "The Jews and Europe", in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, ed. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner (New York: Routledge, 1989), 78.

end, the Frankfurt School was willing to mute any criticisms of the Soviet Union. It is an attitude for which Rockhill might have shown greater sympathy.

One of the earliest criticisms of the Frankfurt School comes not from the ranks of Stalinism, but from Trotskyism. The German member of the Fourth International Heinz Epe – writing under the alias Walter Held – published a 1939 assessment of Horkheimer’s version of Marxism. Held acknowledged the high theoretical level of Horkheimer’s journal and praised its critiques of reactionary philosophical currents such as neo-empiricism and irrationalism. For all of Rockhill’s insistence that his critique of the Frankfurt School is not reductive, he does not display the same appreciation of Horkheimer’s early work in philosophy one sees in Held.

However, Held pointed to a debilitating dualism between theory and practice in Horkheimer’s Marxism, particularly in the latter’s rejection of the need to build a new party against Stalinism. This retreat from organisational struggle in favour of abstract theorising turned Horkheimer, in Held’s view, into a petty bourgeois liberal. As Held wrote:

Horkheimer fails to shed the skin of a bourgeois professor. Despite his recognition and mastery of the materialist dialectic he remains among the clouds of philosophy where he elegantly dispenses with the aesthetic epigones, but without daring the jump towards earth. While, in theory, he recognises the necessity of the unity of theory and practice, he rejects it in practice.¹¹

Despite Horkheimer’s explicit criticisms of the Popular Front, Held argued that the Frankfurt School remained downright ambiguous on the Russian question.¹² In the pages of the Frankfurt School’s *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, there is no substantive push back against Vyshinsky and the Moscow Trials. Meanwhile, pro-Stalinist literature such as the Webbs’ *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation* (1936) was praised “to high heavens” in the journal. Held asked, “[s]hould one really value a vague friendship with Stalin more than the upholding of certain ideas?”¹³ He concluded his essay with one of the clearest and sharpest criticisms of Horkheimer’s brand of Critical Theory: “Marxism as a refuge from the present – that must be the most grotesque variation so far. But exactly this grotesqueness seems to have found a home in the Institute for Social Research. Publisher and collaborators of the journal obviously put more value on agreement on abstract method than on concrete questions of

11 Walter Held [Heinz Epe], “Critical Theory without Political Praxis? A Discussion with the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*”, trans. Alex de Jong. *Historical Materialism*. <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/article/critical-theory-without-political-praxis-a-discussion-with-the-zeitschrift-fur-sozialforschung/>

12 See Horkheimer’s criticisms of popular frontism in Max Horkheimer, ‘Die Philosophie der Absoluten Konzentration’, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, VI:2 (1938), 245-294. Given Horkheimer’s later conservatism, he was reluctant to republish such an article criticising social democracy and popular-front tactics.

13 Ibid. Elsewhere, Rockhill discusses Held’s criticism of the Frankfurt School without mentioning their softness on Stalinism. See Rockhill 2021, 123.

today".¹⁴

One might infer from Held's review that there was nothing inherently anti-Stalinist about Critical Theory. In its withdrawal from the present, there was a room – metaphorically speaking – for a Stalinist suite at the Grand Hotel Abyss, where Horkheimer and Adorno could bump shoulders with Vyshinsky and the Webbs. By rejecting mass struggle and ignoring Trotsky's call for an independent Marxist movement, the Frankfurt School drifted towards accommodation with the Stalinist bureaucracy. While supporting Trotsky was difficult and dangerous, Held believed it remained the principled course. He himself died tragically and was likely murdered by the GPU after his arrest in Russia at the age of 31.¹⁵

Rockhill cannot explain how the same logic that permitted the Frankfurt School to tolerate Stalinism also facilitated its later accommodation to the West. The Thermidorian phase of the Russian Revolution brought its own perks for what Trotsky called "radical tourists", including Lion Feuchtwanger, Henri Barbusse, George Bernard Shaw, Romain Rolland, and (of course), Sidney and Beatrice Webb. One could be a "friend of the Soviet Union" without being a revolutionary, and as Trotsky observed, Lord Passfield (Sidney Webb) could hobnob with Soviets officials and still defend his Majesty's Empire. Many of these fair-weather leftists were initially horrified by Bolshevism but later saw in Stalin a conservative and "realist" force that brought stability. "Friendship for the Soviet bureaucracy is not friendship for the proletarian revolution, but, on the contrary, insurance against it".¹⁶

Thus, rather than criticising the bureaucracy as betraying the revolution, these tourists were rewarded with all the privileges and fanfare the Soviet Union had to offer. Trotsky observed in *Revolution Betrayed*:

For many of the petty bourgeoisie who master neither pen nor brush, an officially registered "friendship" for the Soviet Union is a kind of certificate of higher spiritual interests. Membership in Freemason lodges or pacifist clubs has much in common with membership in the society of "Friends of the Soviet Union", for it makes it possible to live two lives at once: an everyday life in a circle of commonplace interests, and a holiday life elevating to the soul. From time to time the "friends" visit Moscow. They note down in their memory tractors, creches, Pioneers, parades, parachute girls – in a word, everything except the new aristocracy. The best of them close their eyes to this out of a feeling of hostility toward capitalist reaction.¹⁷

The fate of "radical tourists" in the Soviet Union was not always so pleasant; while being wined and dined and feted at one moment, the tables could turn, and they could find themselves

14 Held, "Critical Theory without Political Praxis?"

15 For background, see Walter Held, "Why the German Revolution Failed", *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/otherdox/whatnext/heldgerm.html>

16 Trotsky 1972, 302.

17 Ibid. 305.

blindfolded against a wall. Parallel to Lukács' metaphor of the Grand Hotel Abyss for Western Marxism is also Russell Jacoby's example of the Hotel Lux, a very real and often frightening place to be during the purges. Jacoby points out that if "the Hotel Abyss can symbolise Western Marxism in the 1930s and 1940s, the Hotel Lux can symbolise Soviet Marxism. Unlike the Hotel Abyss, the Lux was not a metaphor but a hotel housing foreign Communists who resided in Moscow. A detailed guide book might mention that the Lux offered a special service: Visitors were often spared the annoyance of checking out. Many foreign Communists were arrested in their rooms in the Lux".¹⁸

Stalinism – or "Actually Existing Socialism" – was not the heroic tableau depicted in Socialist Realist paintings or in Rockhill's writing. It was a despotic and decadent regime that reproduced many of the corrupt features earlier witnessed by Gracchus Babeuf under the French Directory. The Left Oppositionist Christian Rakovsky warned his fellow Bolsheviks of what happens when a revolution degenerates – when popular power is usurped by a narrow clique. History does not exactly repeat, but it rhymes: like their French predecessors, the Soviet Thermidorians chased after wealth, luxury, and debauchery, while the masses remained passive, and authentic Bolshevism was suppressed and ultimately exterminated. Babeuf met his fate on the scaffold; Rakovsky after years of persecution, was among the last Left Oppositionists to capitulate to the Russian Thermidorians. Following the Third Moscow Show Trial, he was sentenced to twenty years of hard labour – only to be shot under Stalin's orders in 1941.

Like many fair-weather friends of Stalinism, Horkheimer and Adorno did not take the self-emancipation of the proletariat seriously. This anxiety and lack of faith in the revolution appears even in Adorno's unconscious. In one dream from 1944, Adorno reported he "was [at] a large party at which Trotsky was present. He was the centre of a group of disciples to whom he was lecturing in an animated and somewhat authoritarian fashion. The question arose of whether one should speak to him. I voted in favour, adding that one should not talk politics, but simply that it would be inelegant to cut such a renowned guest".¹⁹ Even in sleep, revolutionary Marxism appeared as a social impropriety, and the dream's latent meaning dovetailed well with the statements Adorno made wide-awake. At the end of World War II, he declared that the proletariat had no revolutionary potential left: "The decay of the workers' movement is corroborated by the official optimism of its adherents".²⁰

Revolutionary optimism, by contrast, survived in Trotsky's Fourth International, which did not ground itself in prevailing moods, but in a longer historical arc. At the height of the Moscow Trials – while Stalin's agents hunted his family – Trotsky quoted Spinoza: "not to laugh, not to weep, but to understand".²¹ This commitment to reason and revolution stood in

18 Russell Jacoby, *Dialectic of Defeat: Contours of Defeat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 115-16.

19 Theodor W. Adorno, *Dream Notes* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 31.

20 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (New York: Verso, 2005), 113.

21 Leon Trotsky, "I Stake My Life!" *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1937/>

sharp contrast to the increasingly pessimistic turn of Adorno and Horkheimer in the 1940s, best exemplified in their most famous co-authored text, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). There, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche began to displace Hegel and Marx, where Reason itself is implicated as responsible for the horrors of the 20th century.

og/life.htm For more on the tragedy that befall Trotsky's family, see Sam Miller, "The Trotskys Betrayed", *Left Voice*, August 20, 2020. <https://www.leftvoice.org/the-trotskys-betrayed/>

2 The Frankfurt School: Rockhill's Critique and Ours

2.1 Cultural Marxism Conspiracy Theory

Rockhill's *Pipers* does not discuss in any depth the pre-war origins of the Frankfurt School; its focus is chiefly on its post-war evolution. But in his criticisms of its legacy, Rockhill does nothing to address the right-wing, and even fascist, demonisation of the Frankfurt School that circulates so widely in contemporary political discourse. In these screeds from William Lind, Jordan Peterson, Christopher F. Rufo, Kevin MacDonald, and James Lindsay, Adorno and Horkheimer are the poster boys for intellectual evil. To make an analogy, Adorno in philosophy is to reactionaries what George Soros is to politics. In many conservative spaces, the Frankfurt School are literally doctors of the Church of Satan. If classical Marxism failed in its ungodly attempt to overthrow the West, these insidious academics were hellbent on seizing the cultural superstructure first before transforming the material base. While Rockhill describes the Frankfurt School as theorists of the "imperial superstructure", the right-wing version of this claim casts them as the godfathers of Cultural Marxism.¹

Although Rockhill himself is not on the Right, aspects of his critique of the Frankfurt School draw from the same well that these conspiracy theorists often do. This is especially evident in his reliance on writings from *Progressive Labor*, the magazine of the Progressive Labor Party (PLP). Those articles informed not just the Stalinist Left, but Lyndon LaRouche's longwinded diatribes against Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse as CIA agents.²

What occulted mysteries did *Progressive Labor* claim to reveal to its readers? It was already

1 On the affinities between Rockhill's critique of academia and the alt-right's attacks on higher education, see Richard Gilman-Opalsky's review of *Pipers* in *Marx and Philosophy Reviews*. Gilman-Opalsky points out that Rockhill seems blind to the drive to purge the academy of anything resembling Marxism: "Does Rockhill imagine university administrations making a hard distinction between Marxian critical theory and Marxist-Leninist theory?" This also echoes our earlier point that Rockhill does not properly distinguish between elite academia (the "academic" labour aristocracy) and the rest: "...Rockhill tries to substantiate his claim by reporting Judith Butler's atypical exorbitant salary and listing common speaking fees for thinkers like Gayatri Spivak, Étienne Balibar, Catherine Malabou and others...Does Rockhill really think professors doing queer theory and teaching French critical theory and Western Marxism on campuses across the United States get such posh treatment?" Richard Gilman-Opalsky, "Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism?" review, *Marx and Philosophy*, April 2, 2026. https://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviews/22624_who-paid-the-pipers-of-western-marxism-by-gabriel-rockhill-reviewed-by-richard-gilman-opalsky/.

2 It is interesting to note how Rockhill's fellow academic Stalinist, Grover Furr, has connections to the Progressive Labor Party. Their newspaper *Challenge* has written positive reviews of his hatchet work. Furr likewise cites PLP publications on his website. See Progressive Labor Party, "Blood Lies" Fighting Anticommunist Lies", *Challenge*, October 30, 2014. <https://plp.org/home/challenge-newspaper/9686-blood-lies-fighting-anticommunist-lies>

public knowledge that Marcuse worked for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), as had a number of other Marxian intellectuals, including Paul Sweezy, Paul Baran, Otto Kirchheimer, and Franz Neumann. John Herz even quipped that “the left Hegelian weltgeist had found its temporary abode there in the Central European section of OSS”.³ The extent of Marcuse’s connections to intelligence agencies after World War II – and into the 1950s – is a matter that will be discussed below.

However, the PLP went much further than acknowledging these facts. It alleged that Marcuse was still a CIA agent in the 60s; that his ideas about Eros (or “free love”) were a psyop, meant to encourage promiscuity as a distraction from revolutionary politics. And around the time the PLP was circulating these unsubstantiated allegations, the German radical Daniel Cohn-Bendit interrupted Marcuse’s 1969 lecture in Rome to ask why “this”father of the New Left” accepted payments from the CIA”.⁴

Rockhill does nothing to refute the more lurid claims of the PLP but merely cites those articles without further ado. But these PLP stories about Marcuse in the pay of the CIA helped spawn a whole cottage industry of far-right conspiracy theories. Lyndon LaRouche, for instance, built on the PLP rumours to further portray Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse as the masters of brainwashing. Even Angela Davis was recast as a “Marchunian” Rockefeller-funded radical, who was first brainwashed by Adorno in Frankfurt before Marcuse got his cultural Marxist hands on her.

Of course, in LaRouche’s grandiosity, the Frankfurt School was amalgamated with a whole gallery of evil – Kissinger, Lukács, Gramsci, Hegel, the Rockefellers, the Masons, the British Empire, the Mossad, and the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle constituted one big Legion of Doom against Western Civilisation. Only the neo-Platonic Promethean, Leibnizian, Hamiltonian, and, for some reason, Luxemburgian genius of Lyndon H. Larouche Jr. could save the human race from thermonuclear annihilation and cultural degeneracy.⁵

After LaRouche, sectors of the far right globally saw the Frankfurt School as the main enemy of civilisation. Adorno himself, through his connections to Paul Lazarsfeld, the Princeton Radio Project – and other secretive intelligence organisations – assumed mythic proportions in these accounts. He was variously credited with inventing the lyrics to *The Beatles*, promoting soap-opera melodramas, and even helping to cultivate the obsession with American football. It is patently absurd that the man who famously criticised the culture industry is

3 Quoted in Raffaele Laudani, ed., *Secret Reports on Nazi Germany: The Frankfurt School Contribution to the War Effort* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 59.

4 Quoted in A.J.A. Woods, *The Cultural Marxism Conspiracy: Why the Right Blames the Frankfurt School for the Decline of the West* (New York: Verso, 2026), 17. Regarding the PLP’s cultural conservatism, one could supposedly tell who was a member of the PLP in the 1960s by sight: unlike those with bell-bottoms and long hair, the typical PLP member appeared straight-laced and dressed in a suit and tie. This austere dress code was later imitated by Lyndon LaRouche and his National Committee of Labor Caucuses (NCLC).

5 On LaRouche’s conspiratorial thinking, see *ibid.* 45-57.

simultaneously the one who created it.⁶

But not so for the far right, or even leading figures of what Rockhill calls “Actually Existing Socialism,” (AES) like Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Why is Castro’s critique of the Frankfurt School missing in Rockhill’s account, if he is such an important and exemplary advocate of “Global Marxism”? He even quotes Castro at the very beginning of his *Pipers*, a book written as a polemic against the Frankfurt School. So why not include these pertinent observations from *El Comandante*? Right after Castro endorses Bilderberg conspiracy theories, and claims that Walter Lippmann was “the man in charge of making Americans like The Beatles”, he has this to say about Adorno:

The responsibility of drawing up a social theory of rock-and-roll fell to the German sociologist, musicologist and composer Theodor Adorno, ‘one of the most important philosophers of Frankfurt’s Social Research School...’ Adorno was brought to the United States in 1939 to head the Princeton Radio Research Project whose aim was to control the masses. This project was financed by the Rockefeller Foundation and founded by one of the men who David Rockefeller trusted: Hadley Cantril...”

In fact, the Nazis had made an intensive use of radiophone propaganda as an instrument for brainwashing and had turned it into an integral part of the fascist regime. This was observed and studied by the Tavistock networks and it was widely used in all of their experiments. The aim of this project, as stated in Adorno’s ‘Introduction to the Sociology of Music’, was to program a mass “musical” culture as a way to achieve mass social control...⁷

If Rockhill regards the theorising of AES as superior to that of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse – and the rest – it is surprising that he does not cite Castro’s judgment on the matter. What a missed opportunity! But, seriously, and without sarcasm this time, how different are Castro’s conspiracy-mongering claims from the far-right bogeyman image of Adorno as a diabolical mastermind behind American pop culture? The Stalinist school of falsification, which once demonised Trotsky as a fascist spy, seems just as capable of peddling tall tales about Adorno and company.

2.2 Adorno and Horkheimer

Some of Rockhill’s claims rest on FOIA documents that connect the Frankfurt School to intelligence services and even anti-communist plots. We need to be careful in evaluating this, since, while Rockhill reproduces a sample of these documents, he does not provide all of them. It would take a serious historian of the Frankfurt School to wade through these

6 Ibid. 53-54, 62, and 65-66.

7 Fidel Castro, “Reflections by Comrade Fidel: THE WORLD GOVERNMENT – Part I”, *Cuba.cu*, August 17, 2010. <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/reflexiones/2010/ing/fi7081oi.html>

materials and assess them properly. For our part, we can at least distinguish what we know to be true, what remains uncertain, and what is just plain wrong.

When it comes to Adorno and Horkheimer, Rockhill shows remarkably little appreciation of their situation as refugees escaping Nazi Germany. He says virtually nothing about the harassment the early Frankfurt School suffered at the hands of the Nazis: their books were burned (alongside Trotsky's) and they were chased out of their own country for being Jewish and for being leftists. True, Rockhill highlights the fate of Walter Benjamin, and he is right to criticise Horkheimer's callousness towards him, as well as the later censorship of Benjamin's writings. But Benjamin is not the main subject of Rockhill's criticisms. More oddly, Rockhill laments Benjamin's fate while ignoring his influence on Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, or critical theory more broadly. Where is the engagement with Benjamin's own Messianic, theological, and Nietzschean interpretations of historical materialism? And what has had a bigger impact on academic culture: Benjamin's relationship to Brecht – who was hostile to the Frankfurt School – or his relationship to critical theory?⁸ One can make the case for Brecht's positive influence on Benjamin, but Rockhill leaves an entire dimension of Benjamin's legacy out of the picture.

Nor were these thinkers only hounded by the Nazis. The early Frankfurt School also suffered harassment in the United States, at the hands of the FBI and the overall anti-communist climate. Rather than an active desire to become government stooges or CIA plants, their self-censorship and conformity to American norms stemmed more from fear of their survival than from a nefarious plot. We noted above how they were willing to accommodate to Stalinism in the 1930s, and there is nothing inherent to "critical theory" that makes it automatically pro-American. Still, we agree that such conformism inflicted a substantial amount of damage on Adorno and Horkheimer's politics. When Adorno attacked Lukács in the pages of *Der Monat* for being a "Wilhelmitic schoolmaster" and Stalinist apparatchik, Lukács was under house arrest by the Soviets, while Adorno was publishing articles in a magazine funded by the CIA. *Der Monat* was a CIA-backed publication, and it was only too happy to print such an uncharitable article at Lukács' political nadir in 1956.

There are other troubling facts about the Frankfurt School – long known to historians – that Rockhill presents as if they were new revelations. The fact that *Der Monat* was a CIA-funded magazine was common knowledge, and István Mészáros had already criticised Adorno's scurrilous behaviour (and CIA connections) in his book *The Power of Ideology* (1989). Unlike Rockhill, however, Mészáros was a staunch critic of Stalinism, and he defended Lukács – his former teacher – against the persecution he suffered under the Soviets. Considering Rockhill's pro-Soviet stance and his positive attitude toward the later Lukács, one would think this puts him in a conundrum. As a proponent of AES, does he support the crushing of

8 James Philip McFarland, *Constellation: Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin in the Now-Time of History: Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin in the Now-Time of History* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012) and Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (New York: Verso, 2024).

the 1956 Hungarian Revolution with Soviet tanks? If so, what does that imply for “counterrevolutionaries” like Imre Nagy and Lukács – the former being hanged, the latter placed under house arrest? Can Rockhill really maintain his unreconstructed Stalinism while ignoring how shamefully Lukács himself was treated by the Stalinist system?⁹

Mészáros also confronts Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* on a much deeper theoretical level than Rockhill's *Pipers*. It is not enough to provide a sordid paper trail for an idea; one must also refute the idea itself. Mészáros does exactly this in his critique of Adorno's anti-Hegelianism. As he points out:

Adorno's celebrated aphorism ‘the whole is the false’ sounded most impressive in its scathing rejection of Hegel. However, as soon as one started to ask the question, what exactly was the meaning of such a statement, the aphorism totally deflated itself. For, apart from its facile overturning of Hegel's profound (even if in his own use rather problematical) formula: ‘the truth is the whole’, it amounted to no more than a piece of rhetorical meaninglessness.¹⁰

Regarding their political rap sheet, the pro-Western politics of Adorno and Horkheimer are clear. They sided with Western imperialism and Israel against Nasser in the 1956 Suez crisis; they supported Israel during the 1967 war (which Losurdo calls their “August 4th” moment); they expressed disdain and contempt for the student movement, and Horkheimer most egregiously supported the American military effort in Vietnam.¹¹ Rockhill also brings attention to their flippant attitude towards ex-Nazis working in the Institute, as well as Adorno and Horkheimer's broader loyalty to the Federal Republic of West Germany. As we know, Adorno and Horkheimer were deeply pessimistic about the prospects for socialism, eventually settling into what Lukács called the “Grand Hotel Abyss” of academia and the establishment. Those rooms in the Grand Hotel do not pay for themselves, and there is an unmistakably “petty-bourgeois” dimension to Adorno and Horkheimer's critical theory that rejects mass politics.

But even conceding all this, Rockhill does not actually refute the main ideas of Adorno and Horkheimer. There is no attempt to seriously grapple with negative dialectics, Horkheimer's critique of traditional theory, or their understanding of political economy or sociology. It is true Adorno's thinking contains irrationalist elements, a point made clearer in the recent scholarship of Mikko Immanen, who highlights Adorno's debt to Oswald Spengler and Ludwig Klages. In another study, Immanen details the affinities between Adorno's criticism of Enlightenment reason and Heidegger, showing how the Frankfurt School on certain issues

9 On Nagy being shot, see Simon Hall, *1956: The World in Revolt* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2015), 350. On the fate of Lukács, see Michael Löwy, *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism* (London: New Left Books, 1979), 205-13.

10 István Mészáros, *The Power of Ideology* (New York: Zed Books, 2005), 102.

11 Losurdo 2024a, 130.

was closer to Heidegger than to the later Lukács. Adorno put it in a 1948 letter to Thomas Mann that he preferred Heidegger's book on Hegel's *Phenomenology* to Lukács' *The Young Hegel*. And, in another letter to Horkheimer, asking him to write a review of Heidegger's *Holzwege*, he admitted that "in a way ... [Heidegger here] is not all that different to us".¹² In their criticisms of Engels' materialism, Hegelian dialectics, and Enlightenment rationality, the Frankfurt School becomes the final episode in German Romanticism. On this point we agree with Lukács: Adorno remains ostensibly "left" in his normative commitments, but drifts right in his epistemological ones.

Rockhill prides himself on how "non-reductive" and "dialectical" his method is. Nonetheless, there is no appreciation for those elements of Hegelian dialectics and Marxist critique in Adorno's work. Adorno was not exactly a postmodernist and did not completely jettison all aspects of Marxism entirely from his *oeuvre*. We see them emerge in scattered insights into sociology, phenomenology, positivism, Hegel, Heidegger, fascism, and antisemitism, as well as in his reflections on culture – music, opera, his critique of superstition and the occult, and his prolific essays on literature. There are positive things to learn from Adorno, but one must possess the right method to extract and assimilate what is rational in his thought. In drawing up a critical balance sheet of Adorno, we cannot simply declare him to be theoretically bankrupt. If Adorno is nothing more than a theorist of the "imperial superstructure", should we even bother taking him seriously as a philosopher? Such vulgar Marxism gives one licence to ignore the Frankfurt School as merely reactionary rather than to "non-reductively" engage with it.¹³

The same applies for Horkheimer: not everything he wrote is of equal value, and we need to contextualise the stage at which a particular book, essay, or collection of aphorisms was written. When he composed the *Dawn* aphorisms in the 1920s, in political sympathy with Rosa Luxemburg (and under the pen name Heinrich Regius), there are many passages that an orthodox Marxist could still find illuminating and true. In *Dawn*, Horkheimer is absolutely scathing about the academicisation of Marxism, the hypocrisy of the rich, and he even offers sharp criticisms of Nietzsche as a Dionysian reactionary and philosopher who justified slavery. There are other essays that Horkheimer wrote on the history of philosophy that we can still read with profit. His writings on bourgeois scepticism, Vico, German Idealism, positivism, pragmatism, Bergson, and neo-Thomism are first-rate, and written with dialectics and Marxist criticism in mind.

You would not know this from reading Rockhill's account, who does not seem particularly interested in Horkheimer's actual theorising. It is true that Horkheimer's critical theory

12 Quoted in Rüdiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, trans. Ewald Osers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 413.

13 See Rockhill's comments beginning at 17:40 in Emancipations with Daniel Tutt. "Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism? Lecture and Panel Discussion". *YouTube*. February 20, 2026. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V99paWsa8vY>

eventually degenerated into a species of Burkean conservatism and even theism: the notion, as he puts it in the (aptly titled) *Decline* aphorisms, that progressive politics is ultimately faith-based. One can argue that certain weaknesses were present in Horkheimer's critical theory from the beginning – weaknesses later exploited and intensified to shift him from a neo-Kantian “critical” Marxism – which rejected the rationalism of Spinoza and Hegel, and the ontological materialism of Marx and Engels – toward a full-blown Nietzschean and Schopenhauerian pessimism. But the horrible politics of Horkheimer and the reactionary role he increasingly played in later years do not negate his past theoretical insights.¹⁴

If we want to see philosophy as a scientific field, then we cannot just moralise about the politically corrupt nature of thinkers. Either the ideas they argue for are true or they are not. One idea for which Adorno and Horkheimer became notorious for was the “culture industry”. In their polemics against consumerism, they waged a Nietzschean attack against mass society rather than attacking class society. The problem, in their account, was not so much the exploitation of the proletariat as the entertainment of the proletariat. Radio, film, magazines, television, and other consumer habits were said to be turning the entire planet into a disenchanting and anaesthetised dystopia worthy of Aldous Huxley. Despite Adorno's insightful review of Huxley's *Brave New World*, written from a Marxian perspective, the position on mass society in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is not far removed from Huxley's own elitism.¹⁵

Behind Adorno and Horkheimer's disdain for consumerism lies a deeper critique of materialism and of the Marxist conception of human needs. For classical Marxism, the problem with bourgeois society was not an over-abundance of wealth, but its restriction for the masses, and the imposition of asceticism on the proletariat. When it came to Rousseau's rejection of modern civilisation as inherently corrupt in favour of a more Spartan-style republic, Hegel rejected such beautiful-soul primitivism. The proliferation of needs in civil society and the creation of new needs is precisely what separates the modern world from the austerity of feudalism. But Hegel did not see a way of disentangling the production of modern needs from capitalist social relations. Such wealth would inevitably generate poverty, or the immiseration of the worker. Hegel acknowledged that the workers' status in bourgeois society was alienated, yet he did not see a way out of these contradictions. At most, he recommended proto-Keynesian measures aimed at taming the market and even went so far as to advocate shared control between workers and owners within corporations. But Hegel never called for the abolition of private property, and he regarded contemporary egalitarian movements as too abstract.¹⁶

14 On this point, see Harrison Fluss, “Spinoza avec Sade: On Horkheimer's Critique of Objective Reason”, *Historical Materialism*, April 26, 2013. <https://wearemany.org/a/2013/04/states-of-reason.html>

15 See Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 95-118 and Ishay Landa, *The Overman in the Marketplace: Nietzschean Heroism in Popular Culture* (Lanham MD: Lexington, 2009), 80-81.

16 For Domenico Losurdo's discussion of Hegel's criticism of Rousseau, see *Hegel and the Freedom of Moderns* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 188. For Hegel's anticipation of Keynes, see Geoff Mann, *In the*

When Marx and Engels criticised the contradictions of capitalism, they did not do so from the position of Rousseauan asceticism or Luddite machine-wrecking. The machine enslaves the worker under capitalism, but it also provides the key to liberation. The same holds for consumerism. At least from the perspective of Marx and Engels, consumption is not a mark of decay or decadence. They had little or nothing in common with such romantic contempt for modernity or the yearning to return to simpler (and poorer) times. This romantic critique of consumerism reappears in Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, and – as Ishay Landa demonstrates in his work – this has nothing to do with Marx and Engels’ position. The realm of freedom for Marx is grounded in necessity; the more impoverished the economic basis of society, the less space there is for freedom to develop.¹⁷

One cannot separate Adorno and Horkheimer’s criticisms of consumer and mass society from their more conservative moments. For instance, later in his career, Horkheimer expressed worry that contraception would destroy romance and intimate relationships, while Adorno feared that popular culture would degrade people’s attention spans. Radio, the cinema, cartoons, popular protest songs, were all said to be brainwashing the masses into mindless drones incapable of independent thinking or revolt. As much as academics today wince at Adorno’s ignorant (and racist) criticisms of jazz, they rarely connect them to his broader Nietzschean critique of mass society and consumerism. As Landa has pointed out as well, Adorno’s criticisms of jazz have unfortunate affinities with certain far-right attacks. What the fascist thinker Julius Evola writes about jazz is at times practically indistinguishable from Adorno’s attacks on the culture industry:

...America has realised on a large scale and spread all over the world through a very significant phenomenon: jazz. In the ballrooms of American cities where hundreds of couples shake like epileptic and automatic puppets to the sounds of black music, what is awakened is truly a “mass state” and the life of a mechanised collective entity. Very few phenomena are so indicative of the general structure of the modern world in its last phase as this, since what characterises it is the coexistence of a mechanical, inanimate element consisting in movement of a primitivist and subpersonal type that transports man into a climate of turbid sensations (“a petrified forest wrecked by chaos”, said H. Miller).¹⁸

Evola goes on to attack modern sports as a primitivist cult of action that dissolves the individual into the collectivist whole. In *Revolt Against the Modern World* (1934), he extends

¹⁷ *Long Run We Are All Dead: Keynesianism, Political Economy, and Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2017), 27. On Hegel, Jacobinism, and egalitarianism see Doug Enaa Greene and Harrison Fluss, “Hegel, Enlightenment, and Revolution”, *Left Voice*, July 26, 2020. <https://www.leftvoice.org/hegel-enlightenment-and-revolution/>

¹⁸ Ishay Landa, *Fascism and the Masses: The Revolt Against the Last Humans, 1848-1945* (Routledge, 2018), 349, 401, 414-17.
¹⁸ Julius Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 2016), 355-56. See also Landa 2018, 33-34.

this critique to modern civilisation itself, in language that sounds eerily similar to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

After [...] the frantic circulation of capital [...] was set in motion, mankind has finally arrived at a point where the relationship between need and machine (or work) have been totally reversed; it is no longer need that requires mechanical work, but mechanical work [...] that generates new needs. In a regime of superproduction, in order for all the products to be sold it is necessary that the needs of single individuals [...] be maintained and even multiplied so that consumption may increase [...]. Modern civilisation has pushed man onward; it has generated in him the need for an increasingly greater number of things; it has made him more and more insufficient to himself and powerless. Thus, every new invention and technological discovery, rather than a conquest, really represents a defeat and a new whiplash in an ever faster race blindly taking place within a system of conditionings that are increasingly serious and irreversible and that for the most part go unnoticed.¹⁹

What Adorno, Horkheimer, and Evola share is a vision of modernity as ushering in not freedom and plenty, but the Nietzschean “last man”. If there is one central tendency to reject in the Frankfurt School, it is their elitist critique of consumption and mass society – both of which are prerequisites for an international socialism worthy of the name. The realm of freedom presupposes a modern industrial infrastructure. Of course, socialists must advocate a sustainable model of growth that does not accelerate climate change or environmental catastrophe. Growth for its own sake is absurd (and bears the connotations of cancer). Nevertheless, we should not seek to impose unnecessary or conservative limits on the habits of the masses.

But why are we spending so much time discussing consumerism and mass society in Frankfurt School theory? For the simple reason that if there is one thing about Adorno and Horkheimer that Rockhill appreciates, it is their criticisms of the culture industry. In fact, Rockhill’s entire critique of the “theory industry” reads like a Marxist-Leninist parody of Adorno’s concept. However, for Rockhill, Adorno and Horkheimer do not go far enough in criticising themselves as promoters of the “culture industry” at the academic level. He puts it that “Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer provided some insightful criticisms of the culture industry, excoriating the system operative behind mainstream capitalist culture, without subjecting the industry within which they worked—the theory industry—to the same blistering critique”.²⁰ Rockhill’s description of the commodification of theory (and “commodity fetishism”) is extrapolated from a Frankfurt School-style critique of consumerism more generally: “Moreover, the theory industry abides by a temporal logic similar to other culture industries, where tried and true values anchor consumerist traditions while an endless stream of new products vie for that

¹⁹ Evola 2016, 335-36. The quote and ellipses are Landa’s. See Landa 2018, 33.

²⁰ Rockhill 2025, 143.

status in the future”.²¹

There is even a surprising overlap between the Frankfurt School’s criticisms of consumerism, mass society, and modern life and the way the Soviets reacted to American popular culture. For instance, it would not be difficult to mistake tirades from *Pravda* about American rock music and Adorno’s denunciations of pop-music as soulless. But the Soviets went much further in actually banning American music from their citizens. Here is a small sample of popular music that the Russians banned in 1985: Black Sabbath, Alice Cooper, Pink Floyd, Kenet Hit, Talking Heads, Sex Pistols, B52s, Madness, Styx, Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, ACDC, Donna Summer, The Ramones, and – last, but not least – Tina Turner.

Besides being American, what does Tina Turner have to do with this list? Apparently – at least according to the official reasoning – “sex”. These bands, singers, and many others were banned not simply because the Soviets detected “fascistic” or capitalistic messaging. They were also prohibited for “sex” and “eroticism”. Kenet Hit, in particular, was banned for “homosexualism”.²² If Adorno and Horkheimer decried the baleful effects of the cultural industry on the masses, then the Soviets took a step further, and tried to stamp out the culture industry altogether. Even when it comes to homosexuality, Adorno shared Stalinist conservatism about it. He was not shy about writing in print that homosexuality was regressive, totalitarian and promotes “identity thinking”. Adorno’s homophobia (which is not alien to the Stalinist tradition) is on full display with this sentence: “Totalitarianism and homosexuality belong together”.²³

Did Adorno ever support censorship of popular culture along the lines of the Soviets? Unfortunately, he came uncomfortably close in another context. In the 1930s, Adorno wrote under the rather “Aryan”-sounding pen name “Hektor Rottweiler” about the Nazi suppression of jazz. While “Rottweiler” did not explicitly endorse the new Nazi law, neither did he clearly oppose it. Instead, he attacked jazz as culturally degenerate and worthy of disappearance. In these early essays on jazz, one can already discern the lineaments of Adorno’s later critique of the culture industry. It is therefore striking that Rockhill does not address Adorno’s infamous criticisms of jazz. The very word “jazz” does not appear at all in *Pipers*, and nowhere in its more than 400 pages does Rockhill mention this episode of Adorno writing as “Hektor Rottweiler” under the Nazis. As noted above, Rockhill endorses Adorno’s critique of the “culture industry”, but he neglects to trace this style of criticism back to its earlier expression in the 1930s jazz essays.²⁴

21 Ibid. 156.

22 The Revolver Club, “Not Recommended Music! Bands Banned in the USSR”, *The Revolver Club*, July 3, 2023. <https://www.therevolverclub.com/blogs/the-revolver-club/not-recommended-music-bands-banned-in-the-ussr?srsltid=AfmBOoruUrbyrm8lhfoeC68jF3ru4xnGDB6lqetR3xj3aVOTToHgPMI> ; See also Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 212-16.

23 Theodor W. Adorno, “Sociology and Psychology–II,” *New Left Review*, no. 47 (January-February 1968): 96.

24 On Adorno’s writings on Nazism and jazz, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music* (Berkeley: University of

Against Adorno, even in recent popular television series such as *Star Trek*, *Star Wars Andor*, and *The Boys*, we can see open pushback against fascism, imperialism, racism, and capitalist exploitation. There are even depictions of workers' strikes, mass uprisings, and similar forms of resistance shown and celebrated. This is not limited to television or films, but can be found across popular music, novels, comic books, and newer forms of social media. If capitalist culture were simply a smooth and homogenous system of totalitarian control, it would be difficult to account for the appearance of such themes at all, and Adorno would be right that the social whole is irremediably false. Yet these phenomena within the superstructure are not simply imperial in character, but also sites of popular and class struggle. As C.L.R. James put it: "To believe that the great masses of the people are merely passive recipients of what the purveyors of popular art give to them is in reality to see people as dumb slaves."²⁵

Often these progressive themes in popular culture become the targets of reactionary criticism. Such attacks typically come from far-right voices who condemn bourgeois culture as "woke" or as manipulated in the interests of political minorities allegedly seeking to "destroy the West". Unfortunately, it is therefore not a mere coincidence that the Frankfurt School's criticism of mass culture as totalitarian has found a sympathetic ear among reactionary figures such as the late Johathan Bowden, Richard Spencer, and Paul Gottfried. Gottfried writes the following in his memoirs:

...there were Frankfurt School texts I found instructive, particularly *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972) by Adorno and Horkheimer and Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1973), both of which analyze social and cultural phenomena in a manner that I as a nonleftist could appreciate. Adorno's attacks on bureaucratic structures and on Enlightenment rationalism, a theme that runs through *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, have profoundly conservative implications, providing that one can separate such perceptions from the muddled syntax in which they are encased. I thought that one should be free to take from Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse what seems relevant, while being permitted to dump the rest.²⁶

Likewise, Richard Spencer, in conversation with Johathan Bowden, expressed interest in reappropriating Adorno and Horkheimer's criticisms of Enlightenment reason and consumer

California Press, 2002), 470-99.

25 Doug Greene, "One Way Out: The Revolutionary Hero of Andor", *Left Voice*, December 2, 2022. <https://www.leftvoice.org/one-way-out-the-revolutionary-hero-of-andor/>; Doug Greene, "I Have Friends Everywhere: Andor and a People's History of Star Wars", *Left Voice*, June 1, 2025. <https://www.leftvoice.org/i-have-friends-everywhere-andor-and-a-peoples-history-of-star-wars/>; Doug Greene, "Make America Super Again! On Heroes, Comics, and The Boys", *The Blanquist*, August 15, 2024. <https://blanquist.blogspot.com/2024/08/make-america-super-again-on-heroes.html>; Doug Greene, "The Anti-Imperialism of Star Trek: Deep Space Nine", *The Blanquist*, April 24, 2017. <https://blanquist.blogspot.com/2017/04/the-anti-imperialism-of-star-trek-deep.html>; CLR James, *American Civilisation* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 122.

26 Paul E. Gottfried, *Encounters: My Life with Nixon, Marcuse, and Other Friends and Teachers* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2009), 53-4.

culture from a far-right perspective.²⁷ But, as we have seen, not only the far right but even Stalinists can accept the rejection of mass culture found in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In Rockhill's case, this critique of the culture industry becomes an essential component of his own framework. Given his vociferous polemics against the Frankfurt School, it might be surprising to learn how his Stalinism comes with its own Adornian characteristics.

2.3 Marcuse, US Intelligence, and the “Compatible Left”

Throughout *Pipers*, Rockhill repeatedly emphasises the need for an “anti-reductionist” approach. This rhetoric appears designed to soften his more shocking claims and to reassure readers that his judgments are fair and balanced. Considering his constant refrain about the need for “dialectics” and to carefully situate all phenomena and individuals in their specific material and political context (or, in Rockhill's DHM jargon, in their “totality”), we should provide his core argument for historical nuance below:

In assessing the Frankfurt School's collaboration with the US government, it is of the utmost importance to highlight different levels of complicity. The Frankfurt scholars needed employment. Like many intellectuals, their employers had questionable reputations, to put it mildly, but this must be contextualised and situated within an overall calculus of scholarly survival. The simple fact of working for a particular organisation does not automatically disqualify someone intellectually or politically. Within the OSS, for instance, there was a wide spectrum of political orientations, and some researchers were open to or even supportive of certain aspects of socialism. The agency itself was highly compartmentalised, with a clear distinction between the analytic and action arms (although the former fed into, and provided cover for, the latter). Moreover, some intellectuals made a significant portion of their career out of their government service, while others only served for a rather brief wartime stint. Several of them went on to produce important scholarship that was not simply an expression of the dominant ideology. Paul Baran, Arno Mayer, and Paul Sweezy are three such examples. A dialectical approach, which examines the social totality and all of the nuances of individual orientations within it—as well as how they changed over time—is necessary in order to avoid reductivist accounts.²⁸

Admirable sentiments indeed. But, as we will see in the case of Herbert Marcuse, Rockhill often fails to heed his own advice, and he engages in ad hominem attacks on Marcuse's

27 Spencer's master's thesis for the University of Chicago was devoted to Adorno and Wagner. We still do not have access to the thesis, since it is under academic embargo. However, it has been reported that Spencer's thesis justifies Wagner's antisemitism, and that Spencer criticises Adorno for underestimating those reactionary aspects of Wagner's artform. On Bowden and the Frankfurt School, see Jonathan Bowden, “Marxism and the Frankfurt School”, *Jonathan Bowden Archive*, January 12, 2008. <https://jonathanbowden.org/speeches/marxism-and-the-frankfurt-school/>

28 Rockhill 2025, 259–60.

work without addressing many of its central claims. We have already discussed Rockhill's (non)-"reductivist" approach to Adorno and Horkheimer, but, when it comes to Marcuse, reductionism is on full display. Instead of critically evaluating Marcuse's ideas and politics, Rockhill appears more concerned with the bottom line – namely, who is writing Marcuse's checks. Rockhill's strong emphasis on Marcuse's sources of funding is not applied equally to the work of Paul Sweezy or Paul Baran, both of whom worked for US intelligence and later went on to become the chief editors of the socialist magazine *Monthly Review*.

As part of his own "popular front", Marcuse was employed by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during World War II. This fact was widely known and something that Marcuse himself readily acknowledged. Later, when asked about his involvement with the OSS by student radicals, Marcuse expressed no regrets, maintaining that it was anti-fascist work: "If critics reproach me for that, it only shows the ignorance of these people who seem to have forgotten that the war then was a war against fascism and that, consequently, I haven't the slightest reason for being ashamed of having assisted in it".²⁹

Rockhill is correct that working for the OSS is troubling. The OSS was set up in 1942 as an intelligence agency to combat the Axis powers. Its director, William Donovan, was eager to enlist talent from across the political spectrum for the war effort. As he later remarked: "I'd put Stalin on the OSS payroll if I thought it would help us defeat Hitler".³⁰ To that end, Donovan went out of his way to recruit known members of the Communist Party and various left-wing fellow travellers, including Marcuse, Neumann, Sweezy, and Baran. All of these leftist recruits saw their involvement in the OSS as contributing to the war effort and, just as importantly, the destruction of fascism.

In their zeal to join the OSS, these leftists neglected the class nature of American imperialism; that the US state and its various agencies were advancing imperialist interests. The CP member and International Brigade veteran Milton Wolff joined the OSS and later noted that the agency was interested in restoring bourgeois rule in Italy, not popular power. Even though the OSS assisted Italian partisans, it worked to ensure that the Communist Party would not take power: "If the United States Army had not intervened, if the OSS hadn't intervened with large sums of money, Italy would have been a socialist country".³¹ The fight against the Germans and Italians was conducted because they were rival imperialist powers. The US

29 Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 149.

30 Quoted in Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 108.

31 Studs Terkel, *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 485. Marcuse notes the following about OSS collaboration with Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh: "Yes, in one of the branches of OSS. There was a strong position to support Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam at the time. The US thought he could unite the country and keep order, and probably keep the Chinese out. They thought he was just a nationalist, much like the Castro experience". Herbert Marcuse, "Herbert Marcuse Lead by Bill Ritter", in *The Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse Volume VI: Marxism, Revolution and Utopia*, ed. Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce (New York: Routledge, 2014), 430.

ruling class had no fundamental opposition to fascism as such. We also know that the US government helped fund various fascists after World War II in order to contain the Soviets.³²

Another Abraham Lincoln Brigade veteran, Irving Goff, likewise observed that Donovan and the OSS were willing to make use of various leftists for this purpose since it was clear that the American government was the one calling the shots:

He [Donovan] says, "We're collaborating with the Communist Party, boy. Isn't that interesting?" He always called me "boy", affectionately. He says, "But in your connection, make sure the Communist Party doesn't come out ahead". I said, "That's valid. They're out to win the war, we're out to win the war. I'll do the best I can to win this war". He said fine, and left.³³

Donovan's remark about using the Communists recalls a similar statement made by CIO leader John L. Lewis, who also employed party members as union organisers. When Lewis was confronted about this, he answered: "who gets the bird? The hunter or the dog?"³⁴

The involvement of Marcuse, along with Sweezy, Baran, and countless other leftists in the OSS cannot be merely justified under the banner of antifascism. Whatever their noble intentions in fighting fascism, they were still collaborating with US imperialism. However, if Rockhill is correct to call out Marcuse here, this applies just as much to the founders of *Monthly Review*. And, furthermore, it applies doubly to the author of the first 1949 article written for *Monthly Review*, entitled "Why Socialism?"

Who is this mysterious agent of imperialism who graced the opening pages of *Monthly Review*, you might ask? None other than Albert Einstein. But it would be risible to think that the contents of Einstein's article could be adequately addressed merely by citing his involvement with the US government and its nuclear weapons programme. Nor could we even hope to understand the theories of Special and General Relativity by just condemning him as an imperialist stooge.³⁵

32 On this, see Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism: The Political Economy of Human Rights: Volume I* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014).

33 Terkel 1984, 494.

34 Sharon Smith, *Subterranean Fire: A History of Working-Class Radicalism in the United States* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006), 143.

35 For contemporary Marxist-Leninist criticisms of Einstein, see Mike Gimbel's condemnation of Einstein's theory of relativity as an "idealistic attack" on materialism. While Gimbel is not a member of Sam Marcy's Workers' World Party, he has expressed political sympathy for them. Mike Gimbel. "Dialectical Materialism vs the New Physics". *YouTube*. June 14, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTYGHZCBP8>. On a related note, it is worth observing that Einstein was a fellow traveller during the 1930s, who went so far as to defend the Stalinist Show Trials: "By the way, there are increasing signs that the Russian trials are not faked, but that there is a plot among those who look upon Stalin as a stupid reactionary who has betrayed the ideas of the revolution. Though we find it difficult to imagine this kind of internal thing, those who know Russia best are all more or less of the same opinion. I was firmly convinced to begin with that it was a case of a dictator's despotic acts, based on lies and deception, but this was a delusion". Quoted in Albert Einstein

Marcuse's involvement with the US government continued after the war when he was employed by the State Department. As a political analyst, he undertook studies of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc. Rockhill notes that Marcuse's position undoubtedly involved associating with the CIA: "According to his job description, there can be no doubt: Marcuse collaborated with the CIA and other government agencies in producing intelligence reports that guided US foreign policy".³⁶ Granted the Cold War conditions, any governmental study of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc could not escape collaboration with US intelligence. Thus, there is little reason to believe that Marcuse could ever escape that network.

One source Rockhill relies on heavily is the German historian of the Frankfurt School, Tim Müller. In his 2011 book, *Krieger und Gelehrte: Herbert Marcuse und die Denksysteme im Kalten*, Müller investigated not only Marcuse's involvement with the OSS and State Department, but how it shaped his worldview. He claims that by 1951 Marcuse was considered a "leading authority" on communism for the State Department.³⁷ It should also be noted that Marcuse represented the "left" view in the Department, advocating engagement with dissident and reformist wings in the Soviet bloc. Nevertheless, even if he was not an avowed Cold War "hawk", Marcuse was still a researcher for the anti-communist campaign conducted by the United States.

In his role as a "left-wing" State Department functionary, Rockhill argues how Marcuse was part of a broader effort to infiltrate and cultivate a pseudo-left. Rockhill describes this project as the construction of "the compatible Left" – that is, a Left ultimately aligned with Western imperialism and opposed to AES. He cites, in particular, a CIA document from May 1952 outlining a strategy for mounting an ideological offensive against the Soviet Union.³⁸ Such an attack, the document suggests, would be comprehensive, targeting Soviet society both philosophically and politically. In "Marxian language", it proposed dismantling dialectics, materialism, and the theory of surplus-value. Politically, it would promote attacks on Stalin as a dictator, arguing that Bolshevism leads inexorably to totalitarianism, and even cites Boris Souvarine's biography of Stalin as a useful example.

We do not know whether Marcuse ever had access to this document. But Rockhill makes

and Irene Born, *The Born-Einstein letters correspondence between Albert Einstein and Max and Hedwig Born from 1916 to 1955* (London: Macmillan, 1971), 130.

36 Rockhill 2025, 273.

37 Tim Müller, *Krieger und Gelehrte: Herbert Marcuse und die Denksysteme im Kalten* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2011), 119. [Our translation]. According to Rockhill, this book is unsurpassed: "Tim Müller, whose 736-page book on intellectual cold warriors is based on one of the most extensive engagements with the extant archival record to date". Rockhill 2025, 273. Despite Rockhill's praise for this book, it is worth noting that Müller rejects Rockhill's claims that Marcuse was involved in the West German anti-Soviet spy agency known as the Gehlen Organisation as lacking any evidence. See 39:00 in Critical Theory Workshop. "Marcuse and the US National Security State: Cold War Discourse, with Tim Müller". *YouTube*. July 13, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnOCQCiTfVY> and Michael Barker, "Gabriel Rockhill, The Pied Piper of Stalinism", *Under the Mask of Philosophy*, March 5, 2026. <https://underthemaskofphilanthropy.wordpress.com/2026/03/05/gabriel-rockhill-the-pied-piper-of-stalinism/>; See also Rockhill 2025, 268-70.

38 Rockhill 2025, 344.

great hay out of it, strongly implying that any criticism of Stalinism is – whether the critics know it or not – doing the dirty work of imperialist psychological warfare. It does not matter if Stalinism was ultimately responsible for destroying authentic Marxism in the Soviet Union, or how Stalin's narrowminded pragmatism made a mockery of “dialectical materialism”. Nor does it matter that between Lenin's Bolshevik Party and Stalin's CP lay a “river of blood” (as Trotsky called it). If any intellectual or scholar writes a book criticising Stalin's dictatorship, even if they never saw this CIA document, then it is guilt by association.³⁹

In the realm of theory, various leftist intellectuals, including Marcuse, advanced longstanding criticisms of philosophical materialism and the dialectics of nature. But the rejection of the dialectics of nature has a longer prehistory than the phantasmagoria of Cold War intrigue. It can be traced back to Neo-Kantian rejections of Hegelian rationalism and materialism within European social democracy. Marcuse himself developed such criticisms in his doctoral work as a philosophy student. In his early writings on phenomenology and Marxism, as well as in his two books on Hegel, he rejects Soviet-style diamat and Engels' expositions of Marx. Horkheimer, too, in his late-1920s review of *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, rejected Lenin's approach. Nor were they alone within the broader workers' movement in criticising classical Marxist philosophy: similar critiques can be found in Austro-Marxism (e.g., the Adlers), council communism (Anton Pannekoek), and other left-wing critics of the Soviets (Karl Korsch). Even within the Soviet Union, the Mechanists argued that Marxism should be freed from dialectics and Hegel altogether.

We agree that materialism and the dialectics of nature are foundational for Marxism, and that it is no coincidence that CIA operatives sought to target them. But these criticisms of dialectics and materialism must be addressed on the theoretical plane, rather than being superficially dismissed in the manner of vulgar Marxism. Not every criticism of dialectical materialism amounts to a psychological operation, and many of these predated the CIA's existence.

2.4 Marcuse, Soviet Marxism, and The New Left

Marcuse left government service in the early 1950s, returning to university teaching and research at Brandeis University (1954-65). But Rockhill insists that Marcuse's involvement with these intelligence services continued during this period: “[Marcuse] was simply pursuing his intelligence work under academic cover. When he began his academic career, he was actually still officially a member of the State Department (his temporary leave from it only

39 Ibid. 347. Regarding Souvarine's biography of Stalin, while one can reject his conclusion that Lenin is ultimately responsible for the bureaucratic dictatorship, the book is not without merit. Merely dismissing it because it is cited in a hidden CIA document is not enough to properly evaluate it. Indeed, the English translation of the biography was made by the Trinidadian Marxist C.L.R. James. Does that make James a CIA asset? It would be exceptionally odd for the State Department to deport someone who provided such a valuable service to the fight against communism.

became permanent in September 1953)".⁴⁰

Even later in the decade, Rockhill argues that these connections persisted. He claims how Marcuse's book *Soviet Marxism* (1958) was effectively vetted by the intelligence community and funded through grants from the Rockefeller Foundation. Rockhill points out that Marcuse's acknowledgements thanked several figures (old friends and fellow-travellers) who had longstanding ties to US intelligence: "In sum, of the six principal individuals thanked by Marcuse in his ostensibly academic publication, at least three were major CIA collaborators (and the others circulated in similar networks)".⁴¹ Müller himself concurs, observing that the book was a continuation of previous government research:

The critical theorist and Marxist Marcuse was interested in the same developments as the intelligence analyst Marcuse. There was an identity of cognitive approaches that extended to the point where enlightenment transformed into concrete measures of psychological warfare. "Soviet Marxism" was a sophisticated reworking and continuation of the research program that Marcuse had pursued as a communism expert in the State Department.⁴²

Nevertheless, even if we concede that Marcuse's book largely continues the research he conducted for the State Department, that does not by itself debunk any of the claims advanced in *Soviet Marxism*. This book is not a simple anti-communist harangue – à la Robert Conquest or Richard Pipes. Marcuse notes that the USSR was not socialist in the sense envisioned by Marx and Engels. At the same time, he claims that the Soviet Union was ruled by a non-capitalist bureaucracy that oppressed the workers and peasants. But, in contrast to many Cold Warriors, he did not think that the Soviet bureaucracy was a new exploiting class. More like Isaac Deutscher, Marcuse was optimistic about the reform prospects for Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation campaign. Finally, he rejected the idea that the USSR was an inherently expansionist state bent on global domination. Instead, he argued that the regime's conservative commitment to "socialism in one country" tended towards coexistence and accommodation rather than aggressive expansion.⁴³

Aside from the issue of government funding, what Rockhill objects to most in Marcuse's *Soviet Marxism* is its lack of deference to Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. He argues that Marcuse also failed to grasp the material and political situation of the USSR, and instead indulged in what he calls a "puerile celebration of a utopian version of socialism in order to juxtapose it to the horrors of socialism in the real world".⁴⁴ Moreover, he contends that Marcuse lacks the historical-materialist "rigor" he attributes to other preferred writers of Soviet history, such as

⁴⁰ Ibid. 288.

⁴¹ Ibid. 290.

⁴² Müller 2011, 472. [Our translation]

⁴³ For a concise summary of Marcuse's views on the USSR, see Greene 2023, 140-41.

⁴⁴ Rockhill 2025, 299-300.

Annie Lacroix-Riz, Domenico Losurdo, Ludo Martens, and Michael Parenti.⁴⁵

Let us consider these pious doctors of the church of Stalinism, whom Rockhill cites as ultimate authorities. He cites them less for their expertise on the Soviet Union, and for their ideological bonafides. Lacroix-Riz has written on Soviet foreign policy as it relates to France during the 1930s and is a longtime Marxist-Leninist activist. Ludo Martens is best known for his book *Another View of Stalin* (1994), a work that does not rise much above the scholarly level found in the writings of Grover Furr, an arch-Stalinist conspiracy theorist.⁴⁶ The late Michael Parenti never claimed to be a specialist on the USSR, although, unlike Martens and Furr, he did condemn Stalin's purges in his book *Blackshirts and Reds* (1997).⁴⁷

Finally, Losurdo's greatest strengths as a Marxist lay in the history of philosophy rather than in Soviet historiography. When we read the historian Albert Soboul, it is for his insights on the French Revolution, not his justifications for a lifetime membership in the PCF. Or when we read W.E.B. Du Bois on the Civil War and Reconstruction, we do not need to treat his paeans to Stalin with the same level of seriousness. The same could be said about Losurdo. There are, of course, many revisionist scholars of the USSR whom Rockhill might have consulted, such as Sheila Fitzpatrick and J. Arch Getty. But none of them defend Stalinist dogma.

Strangely, Rockhill chides Marcuse for failing to take account of an obscure 1955 CIA document that purportedly argued that Stalin was not a dictator.⁴⁸ But a closer reading of that same document suggests something quite different: the CIA still regarded Stalin as the all-powerful leader of the USSR, surrounded by many willing lieutenants. While the report notes that Soviet leadership formally operated on a collective basis, it also acknowledges that "there was no organised opposition" to Stalin. Indeed, how could there have been? Stalin accumulated an immense amount of power as General Secretary, and established a system of bureaucratic patronage, privilege, and terror. Open opposition to Stalin was invariably met with imprisonment, if not execution. It is truly sad that the CIA analysts who produced the document Rockhill cites did not avail themselves of Marcuse's *Soviet Marxism*. Even that book – funded with Rockefeller money – explains the reality of the Soviet system better than most "Marxist-Leninist" scholars can.

In the following decade, Marcuse became a central figure of the New Left. Yet, again, Rockhill maintains that Marcuse was still likely functioning as a government asset during the 1960s. For one thing, he holds the view that the New Left was simultaneously against the system and compatible with it. Even while the FBI was working to disrupt the New Left through

45 Ibid. 300.

46 For a thorough criticism of Martens' work, see Douglas Greene, *In Stalin's Shadow: Leon Trotsky and the Legacy of the Moscow Trials* (London: Resistance Books, 2025), 58-77.

47 Michael Parenti, *Blackshirts and Reds: Rational Fascism and the Overthrow of Communism* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1997), 57.

48 See Rockhill 2025, 300. The full document can be found at Central Intelligence Agency, "Comments on the Change of Leadership in the USSR", *The CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room*, March 2, 1955. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80-00810A006000360009-0.pdf>

COINTELPRO, Rockhill argues that the state also sought to hijack the movement in order to defeat the Marxist “Old Left”:

The US national security state thereby often took a two-pronged approach, using what it could of the New Left as a weapon of war against the purported Old Left, while seeking over all to beat back any form of left politics. In other words, the New Left was an enemy, which is clear from the long and detailed history of the FBI's COINTELPRO (COunterIntelligence [sic] PROgram), which was officially run from the mid-1950s through the early 1970s and was designed to “disrupt and destabilise”, “cripple”, “destroy” or otherwise “neutralise” dissident political movements and organisations. However, the New Left was also sometimes recognised, particularly by agencies like the CIA, as a useful enemy”.⁴⁹

In that regard, Rockhill claims that Marcuse served as a conduit to create a compatible Left. He insinuates that Marcuse's promotion by major media outlets as a guru for the New Left was managed by the intelligence agencies: “...the bourgeois media is largely controlled and overseen by the US national security state. This begs the question: was the promotion of Marcuse as the godfather of the New Left due, at least in some degree, to the bourgeois state's mobilisation of its media assets?”⁵⁰

Without descending into conspiracy-mongering, the simpler explanation is that students and radicals found Marcuse's work often compelling and insightful. He was a charismatic and outspoken figure who publicly condemned the Vietnam War and expressed solidarity with new social movements – most notably, environmentalism, Black Power, feminism, and the antiwar movement. But Rockhill remains adamant about Marcuse's anti-communism: “His radicalisation did not ... call into question the fundamental orientation that allowed him to dutifully serve the US national security state and the capitalist ruling class in their intellectual world war: he remained an anticommunist until the end”.⁵¹

Given Rockhill's strident criticism of Marcuse as “an anticommunist until the end”, it is worth quoting Marcuse's actual positions here. It is true Marcuse was sharply critical of Stalinism; nevertheless, he also defended his student – and prominent Communist Party member – Angela Davis, who lost her academic position and was viciously repressed by the state. In 1972, Marcuse linked the struggle to free Angela Davis to the Black Power movement and to the victory of the NLF in Vietnam:

Angela has always emphasised during her defense that she is a communist. What this means in this regard is this: understand that the liberation struggle of blacks is

49 Rockhill 2025, 310-11.

50 Ibid. 310-11.

51 Ibid. 330. For a counter to this view on Marcuse, see Charles Reitz, “When Marxist Intellectuals Collaborated With the CIA”, *Counterpunch*, December 12, 2025. <https://www.counterpunch.org/2025/12/12/when-marxist-intellectuals-collaborated-with-the-cia/>

a part of, or aspect of, the general struggle for liberation from capitalism. And this general struggle (of course with minority impacts) has an extremely concrete and horrifying target: the war against the Vietnamese people. The complete terrorism of late monopoly capitalism is concentrated against them...The counterrevolution must be stopped. If it's not, the alternative will be fascism. It is not we here, here in the USA, who stand in the forefront of the fight—it is rather the people of Vietnam. Let us work for their liberation!"⁵²

If Marcuse was truly acting as an agent of imperialism to destroy the Old Left, why would he go out of his way to defend a member of the Communist Party, and call for the victory of the Vietnamese communists over US imperialism? Perhaps Rockhill thinks that Marcuse needed to maintain his cover somehow, and that is why he publicly defended Davis? To even ask such a question seems patently absurd.

As is clear, Rockhill denounces Marcuse as one of the godfathers of Western Marxism and the “compatible left”. But he largely ignores the fact that Marcuse expressed solidarity with various Third World figures and movements. For example, beyond Vietnam, Marcuse praised Che Guevara as “very far from the Stalinist bureaucrats, very near to socialist man”.⁵³ It is not only Cuba that he was hopeful about, but Marcuse was even inspired by the early phases of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. He states his support for all these movements in his *Essay on Liberation* (1969), arguing how the cracks in the Stalinist monolith opened up new radical alternatives within socialism:

Last but not least, the opposition within the advanced capitalist countries has been seriously weakened by the repressive Stalinist development of socialism, which made socialism not exactly an attractive alternative to capitalism. More recently, the break in the unity of the communist orbit, the triumph of the Cuban revolution, Vietnam, and the “cultural revolution” in China have changed this picture. The possibility of constructing socialism on a truly popular base, without the Stalinist bureaucratisation and the danger of a nuclear war as the imperialist answer to the emergence of this kind of socialist power, has led to some sort of common interest between the Soviet Union on the one side and the United States on the other.⁵⁴

Finally, if Marcuse were still an intelligence asset toward the end of his career, why was the FBI keeping him under strict surveillance? None other than FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover considered Marcuse to be a dangerous radical. In a 1966 report Hoover wrote:

52 Herbert Marcuse, “Charles Reitz translator: Marcuse item about Angela Davis, Frankfurt, June 1972”, in Kellner 2014, 216-17.

53 Herbert Marcuse, “Interview with Pierre Viansson-Ponte”, in *ibid.* 297.

54 Herbert Marcuse, “An Essay on Liberation”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/marcuse/works/1969/essay-liberation.htm>

Although subject [Marcuse] is not a member of a basic revolutionary organisation, he is a self-admitted Marxist who travels extensively making frequent speeches in which he espouses Marxism. He is also currently participating actively in protest demonstrations against the United States intervention in Vietnam [and] is an author and a philosophy professor [and therefore] in a position to influence others against the national interest in a time of national emergency.⁵⁵

In other words, Hoover considered Marcuse a threat to national security. While state agencies can certainly be clumsy, it strains credulity to imagine the CIA would keep the FBI completely in the dark about a supposed asset. Rockhill ultimately refuses to face the reality that Marcuse was not in any respect a pro-imperialist stooge by the 1960s. This was something that even Hoover and the FBI recognised.

Rockhill condemns Marcuse's analysis of Western capitalism in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) (*ODM*) as a continuation of his earlier intelligence work. Marcuse's text argues that traditional class struggle is outmoded in the West and instead champions various outside groups as potential agents of revolutionary change. Rockhill claims this enabled Marcuse to play the role of a radical recuperator, channelling the New Left movements into harmless utopianism: "Marcuse's capitalist and state backers were clearly pleased with the central thesis of the book, namely that class struggle had been overcome by economic and technological development, and the possibility of an alternative society was thereby foreclosed, or at least banished to the realm of the imagination".⁵⁶

Certainly, one can disagree with the conclusions of *ODM*. Philosophically, one can be critical of Marcuse's philosophical reliance on his old professor (and unrepentant Nazi) Martin Heidegger. Marcuse's criticisms of "technological" or "instrumental" rationality are too closely aligned with Heidegger's own observations about modern technology. Thus, despite the sharp criticisms of Heidegger that appear in Marcuse's interviews and other writings, he never fully broke with him in the realm of theory. Marcuse's arguments about "repressive desublimation" and his dichotomisation of "true" and "false" needs also echo the romantic rejection of consumerism and mass society already present in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Lastly, regarding the assumptions Marcuse made about political economy in *ODM*, Paul Mattick wrote one of the strongest reviews from a more orthodox Marxian standpoint. Marcuse himself reportedly described Mattick's response as "the only solid and real criticism" of his book.⁵⁷

There is also a certain irony in the fact that Marcuse's analysis parallels the central thesis of *Monopoly Capital* by Paul Sweezy and Paul Baran, published by Monthly Review Press –

55 Quoted in Stephen Gennaro and Douglas Kellner, "Under Surveillance: Herbert Marcuse and the FBI", *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* Volume 26 (2009): 305-06. https://sgennaro.blog.yorku.ca/files/2011/01/gennaro_writing-sample_marcuse.pdf

56 Rockhill 2025, 305.

57 Quoted in Gary Roth, *Marxism in a Lost Century: A Biography of Paul Mattick* (Boston: Brill, 2015), 275.

Rockhill's own publisher – in 1966. In that book, Sweezy and Baran employ a Keynesian-Marxian framework to argue that the rate of profit does not tend to fall but actually rises under monopoly capitalism. This creates a problem for the system as to where to invest the growing surplus, which in turn leads not to universal human flourishing but to various forms of parasitic waste. The affinities between these conclusions and Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of mass society seem unmistakable. And, like the first generation of the Frankfurt School, Sweezy and Baran claim that the working class is no longer the primary revolutionary agent:

The answer of traditional Marxian orthodoxy—that the industrial proletariat must eventually rise in revolution against its capitalist oppressors—no longer carries conviction. Industrial workers are a diminishing minority of the American working class, and their organised cores in the basic industries have to a large extent been integrated into the system as consumers and ideologically conditioned members of the society. They are not, as the industrial workers were in Marx's day, the system's special victims, though they suffer from its elementality and irrationality along with all other classes and strata—more than some, less than others.⁵⁸

Sweezy and Baran concede that imperialist wars abroad generate new crises at home; such radical upsurges are likely to emerge from students, racial minorities, and other marginal groups. And yet *Monopoly Capital* argues that there is no real internal opposition – i.e., no working-class movement – strong enough to overthrow Western capitalism. Again echoing the critique of the “culture industry” found in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (though without directly drawing from the well of Nietzschean pessimism), Sweezy and Baran maintain that the ruling class can effectively “buy off” the workers. The task of political struggle is thus relegated to small groups, since most of the population has been pacified and integrated into bourgeois society.

Mandel observed in his review of *Monopoly Capital* how this line of argument led Sweezy and Baran to virtually deny the possibility for socialism in the United States:

But there still remains the inescapable conclusion that all these forces are today minority forces in American society; that even the conscious option in favor of socialism, as a result of the example of the more efficient and more democratic functioning of the countries calling themselves socialist, – some time in the future predicted by Sweezy and Baran, – could only be a minority action as are all purely ideological options in history. This much is certain – in the absence of powerful socio-economic motives growing from the basic instability of American society, the hope for a revolutionary overthrow of monopoly capitalism by these forces remains largely utopian.⁵⁹

58 Paul A. Baran and Paul Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966), 363.

59 Ernest Mandel, “Surplus Capital and Realisation of Surplus Value”, *Marxists Internet Archive*.

As one can observe, while *Monopoly Capital* is more firmly grounded in political economy than *ODM*, their conclusions strongly overlap. Both works argue that the industrial proletariat had been integrated into Western capitalism, and that the revolutionary subject must be sought for elsewhere. For Sweezy and Baran, just as much as Marcuse, socialism is no longer a material necessity but assumes the character of a Kantian regulative ideal. But replacing material necessity with categorical imperatives is the mark of any utopian reformism, a theoretical manoeuvre that goes all the way back to Eduard Bernstein's own moralising alternative to classical historical materialism.

All of this discussion sets the stage for a final irony. For we find Paul Baran, in a letter to Paul Sweezy, criticising Marcuse along precisely these same lines:

I have just finished reading Marcuse's new book (in MS) [*One Dimensional Man*], which in a laborious kind of a way advances this very position which is called the Great Refusal or the Absolute Negation. Everything is *Dreck*: monopoly capitalism and the Soviet Union, capitalism and socialism as we know it; the negative part of the Marx story has come True — its positive part remained a figment of imagination. We are back at the state of the Utopians pure and simple; a better world there should be but there ain't no social force in sight to bring it about. Not only is Socialism no answer, but there isn't anyone to give that answer anyway. From the Great Refusal and the Absolute Negation to the Great Withdrawal and the Absolute Betrayal is only a very short step. I have a very strong feeling that this is at the moment in the center of the intellectuals' thought (and sentiment) — not only here but also in Latin America and elsewhere, and that it would be very much our commitment *sich damit Auseinander zu setzen* [to confront and come to terms with this sentiment]. There is hardly anyone else around. The official left simply yells [you have been victimised] à la *Political Affairs*, others are bewildered.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, given their shared premise that the industrial working class in the West has been integrated and effectively bought off, we do not see how Baran can criticise Marcuse so harshly without falling prey to the same problems. When it comes to the "Great Refusal" leading to the "Great Withdrawal" (or worse) he doth protest too much. The truth is the political economy underlying the Frankfurt School is largely compatible with the one advanced by Sweezy and Baran.

About the overlap between Marcuse and the founders of *Monthly Review* in their departure from class struggle and classical Marxism, Rockhill remains silent. Marcuse's work is castigated as a CIA psyop that helped defang the New Left's connection to orthodoxy; but

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/mandel/1966/10/surplus.htm>

60 Paul A. Baran, "Paul A. Baran to Paul Sweezy – October 10, 1963", in *The Age of Monopoly Capital: Selected Correspondence of Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, 1949 – 1964*, ed. Nicholas Baran and John Bellamy Foster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017), 430.

when Baran and Sweezy reach the same conclusions, Rockhill gives them a pass, raising no comparable accusations of state collaboration or of being dupes of American imperialism.

One final episode from Marcuse's intellectual career is worth dwelling on, since Rockhill presents this as a prime example of his alleged betrayal. Towards the end of his life, Marcuse expressed solidarity with the East German dissident Rudolf Bahro. Unlike many other dissidents, Bahro was himself a Marxist and the author of *The Alternative in Eastern Europe* (1977), an analysis of the Eastern Bloc inspired by Marxist categories.⁶¹ The East German authorities arrested Bahro and accused him of working with Western intelligence. Rockhill accepts the claims of the East Germans at face value that Bahro was some sort of agent. But, as far as anyone can determine, such allegations were baseless; his real crime was to write a book critical of the state. As Alexander Amberger notes in his history of dissident leftists in East Germany:

Since the actual content of *The Alternative* did not provide sufficient legal grounds for arrest, Bahro was detained on the basis of Paragraph 100 of the German Criminal Code, which referred to 'subversive associations' – a very elastic concept. The trial that followed was in the end nothing more than a farce. Bahro was accused of intelligence activities and the disclosure of secrets and was sentenced to eight years in prison.⁶²

Marcuse, along with other leftists such as Ernest Mandel, Pierre Frank, and Rudi Dutschke, came out in open solidarity with Bahro. They demanded his release and hailed *The Alternative* for its critical analysis. Their solidarity was extended not to an agent of imperialism but to a fellow Marxist.

However, Rockhill claims that their support for Bahro did align with the interests of Western intelligence: "Whatever the case may be, the position he [Marcuse] took perfectly aligned with the agenda of his former colleagues in the State Department and his friends who managed the soft-power investments of the capitalist ruling class".⁶³ While the capitalist press may have condemned Bahro's treatment, this was undoubtedly disingenuous, since they did not approve of any socialist reformer in the East. Rather, they seized the opportunity to take cheap shots at "East German totalitarianism", even while backing the brutal repression of leftists in the West. What Rockhill ultimately does here is create a false amalgam, bringing together Marcuse and the CIA simply because both were opposed to Soviet bloc "AES".

On the 30th anniversary of East Germany in 1979, Bahro was granted amnesty on the condition

61 For more on Bahro's *The Alternative*, see Ernest Mandel, *From Stalinism to Eurocommunism: The Bitter Fruits of 'Socialism in One Country'* (London: New Left Books, 1978), 100-124 and Marcel van der Linden, *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union: A Survey of Critical Theories and Debates Since 1917* (Boston: Brill, 2017), 228-239.

62 Alexander Amberger, *Dissident Marxism and Utopian Eco-socialism in the German Democratic Republic: The Intellectual Legacies of Rudolf Bahro, Wolfgang Harich, and Robert Havemann* (Boston: Brill, 2024), 169.

63 Rockhill 2025, 322.

that he leave the country. He accepted and departed for West Germany on 17 October 1979.⁶⁴ Despite any “legalese” to the contrary, this amounted in practice to a deportation. Bahro was punished by the East German state for writing a critical Marxist analysis. Rather than confront his actual ideas, they painted him as a criminal in service to the West. But this is straight out of a Moscow Trials playbook, where ideas were dismissed as just a mask for a criminal conspiracy. Rockhill seems all too willing to believe the claims of the Stasi without question.

As we can see, Rockhill’s criticisms of Marcuse are among the weakest in his book. This weakness is not an accident but flows from his own Stalinist methodology. When Marcuse was attacked in the 1960s for being a CIA agent by the Progressive Labor Party, the anarchist Murray Bookchin rightly claimed that their style of character assassination had its origins in the Moscow show trials:

A spiritual erosion developed within the [Russian Communist] party that paved the way for the politics of the secret police, for character assassination, and finally for the Moscow trials and the annihilation of the Old Bolshevik cadre. One sees the return of this odious mentality in PL articles like “Marcuse: Cop-out or Cop?”—the theme of which is to establish Marcuse as an agent of the CIA. (See Progressive Labor, February 1969.) The article has a caption under a photograph of demonstrating Parisians which reads: “Marcuse got to Paris too late to stop the May action”. Opponents of the PLP are invariably described by this rag as “redbaiters” and as “anti-worker”. If the American left does not repudiate this police approach and character assassination it will pay bitterly in the years to come.⁶⁵

One may disagree with Bookchin’s criticisms of Leninism, but his point still stands today. Unless one believes that J. Edgar Hoover was somehow kept out of the loop, then there is no evidence that Marcuse remained a CIA or State Department asset in the 1960s. And drawing from the well of unscrupulous articles written by the PLP in its factionalist heyday is not something that inspires confidence. What is needed instead is a genuinely materialist approach to the Frankfurt School, that can develop a critique of its ideas and institutional connections without the phantasmagorical delusions of Stalinism, LaRouche, or the contemporary alt-right.

64 Amberger 2024, 169-70.

65 Murray Bookchin, “Listen, Marxist!” *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bookchin/1969/listen-marxist.htm>

3 The Critical Balance Sheet on Actually Existing Stalinism

If we wish to thoroughly criticise Rockhill's approach, we must confront the historical legacy of Stalinism. Throughout Rockhill's work, there is an uncritical adulation of "AES", past and present alike. He presents the Soviet Union, China, and similar states as principled opponents of imperialism and steadfast champions of world revolution. For Rockhill, criticism of AES is not merely mistaken but practically *verboten* – tantamount to treason against the revolution, and, at times, indistinguishable from a CIA psyop. But this rose-coloured view of the Soviet Union, China, and related regimes obscures the repeated double-crossing of anti-imperialist and workers' struggles by Stalinism itself. These historical facts cast serious doubt on the revolutionary credentials of "Marxism-Leninism".

Part of the tragedy of Stalinism is that it often drew into its orbit some of the most devoted, idealistic, and committed militants of the working class and oppressed. These cadres joined Communist Parties to organise workers, combat oppression, and fight fascism. But their loyalty to the Comintern and the USSR did not necessarily translate into loyalty to communism. In countless instances, militants became unwitting agents of reaction despite their revolutionary intentions. The catastrophe of Stalinism lies here: that so many of the best and brightest saw their ideals weaponised against the very causes for which they struggled. Nearly a century of betrayals followed, and we address several of the most consequential below.

3.1 China

Considering that Rockhill is a vociferous defender of the PRC, he should be aware of how the Soviet Union undermined the Communist movement there during the 1920s. While China was in the middle of a great upheaval against imperialism, feudal landlords, and capitalists, the Comintern under Stalin directed the Communist Party of China (CPC) to subordinate itself to the Kuomintang (KMT). The KMT was dominated by landlords and "progressive" capitalists who were said to represent a necessary stage in the unification of China. The Comintern justified this policy, since the KMT was seen as a reliable ally to the Soviet Union. Yet this meant that, in the great struggles of the 1920s, the revolutionary activities of Chinese communists were constrained by its need to not antagonise the KMT. The Comintern advisor Mikhail Borodin described the policy in racist terms as follows: "The present period is a

period in which the Communists should do the coolie service for the Kuo Min Tang [sic]”.¹

Despite the efforts of the Chinese communists to hold back popular struggles, these erupted nonetheless. Alarmed by such upheavals, the KMT leadership planned an annihilation campaign against the Communists. But, even as Trotsky and CPC members pushed to break with the KMT, Stalin insisted that the alliance be preserved at all costs. The outcome – long foreseen – was the 1927 massacres of urban communist cadres and trade unionists. The CPC was subjected to a devastating White Terror, and many of its most brilliant and dedicated militants were slaughtered. As Isaac Deutscher wrote, the Chinese Revolution was sacrificed to the interests of the Soviet bureaucracy and “socialism in one country:” Thus the Chinese communists were made to pay their tribute to the sacred egoism of the first workers’ state, the egoism that the doctrine of socialism in one country had elevated to a principle. The hidden implications of the doctrine were brought out and written in blood on the pavements of Shanghai”.²

3.2 Germany

Perhaps the greatest tragedy world communism suffered due to Stalinism occurred in Germany. After the Great Depression began in 1929, mass unemployment and political instability created significant revolutionary opportunities throughout the world. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Weimar Germany. The Communist Party of Germany (KPD) was the largest Communist party outside the USSR and was poised to make major political advances. However, the Depression also enabled Hitler and National Socialism to gain mass support. It was not long before Hitler was a serious contender for political power – along with being an existential threat to the KPD and the German workers’ movement.

Unfortunately, the KPD was largely blind to the Nazi menace and refused to form a united front with the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD) to stop them. The KPD’s strategy was shaped by the Comintern’s Third Period line adopted in 1928. Stalin argued that the SPD was the greater threat and condemned them as “social fascists”:

There is just as little ground for thinking that Social-Democracy can achieve decisive successes in battles, or in governing the country, without the active support of the fighting organisation of the bourgeoisie. These organisations do not negate, but supplement

1 Quoted in Chen Duxiu, “How Stalin-Bucharin Destroyed the Chinese Revolution”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/chen-duxiu/1929/12/destroy.htm> ; For background on the Chinese Revolution of 1925-1927, see Harold R. Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010).

2 Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky 1921 – 1929* (New York: Verso, 2003), 273. The defeats of 1927 had long-term implications for the Chinese Revolution. The survivors retreated to the countryside, where they waged guerrilla warfare under the leadership of Mao Zedong. The Chinese Revolution would succeed more than two decades later in 1949. However, this victory was won largely by ignoring the “fraternal” advice of Joseph Stalin. The newborn People’s Republic copied the Soviet model and was never a healthy workers’ state.

each other. They are not antipodes, they are twins. Fascism is an informal political bloc of these two chief organisations; a bloc, which arose in the circumstances of the post-war crisis of imperialism, and which is intended for combating the proletarian revolution.³

This line meant that the KPD would direct its main fire against the SPD, not Hitler and the Nazis.

As the political situation in Germany reached a boiling point, Trotsky warned that, without a united front between the workers' parties they would be completely decimated. He stated in December 1931: "Worker-Communists, you are hundreds of thousands, millions; you cannot leave for anyplace; there are not enough passports for you. Should fascism come to power, it will ride over your skulls and spines like a terrific tank. Your salvation lies in merciless struggle. And only a fighting unity with the Social Democratic workers can bring victory. Make haste, worker-Communists, you have very little time left!"⁴

Nonetheless, the KPD remained largely aloof in recognising the danger. As party leader Ernst Thälmann said: "Nothing could be more fatal for us than to opportunistically overestimate the danger posed by Hitler-fascism".⁵ In effect, the KPD treated the Nazis' rise as a symptom of German capitalism's imminent demise. Hitler's ascension, they believed, would only be short-lived before the inevitable proletarian revolution. Or, as the attitude went: "After Hitler, us!"

Upon Hitler becoming Chancellor in January 1933, the KPD, SPD, and the entire German left was simply crushed. A Nazi dictatorship was swiftly established, and the largest workers' movement in the world was defeated without firing a shot. In the face of this world-historic catastrophe, the Comintern offered no critical summation. On the contrary: it proclaimed that the KPD had followed the correct line from beginning to end. The Comintern declared on 1 April 1933: "Having heard Comrade Heckert's report on the situation in Germany, the

3 Joseph V. Stalin, "Concerning the International Situation", *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1924/09/20.htm>; For background surrounding the term "social fascism" see Lea Haro, "Entering a Theoretical Void: The Theory of Social Fascism and Stalinism in the German Communist Party", *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory* Vol. 39, No. 4 (December 2011): 563-582.

4 Leon Trotsky, "For a Workers' United Front Against Fascism", *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1931/311208.htm> Trotsky compared the situation facing the German Left to bulls before the slaughter in the following Aesopian fable he wrote: "A cattle dealer once drove some bulls to the slaughterhouse. And the butcher came nigh with his sharp knife." "Let us close ranks and jack up this executioner on our horns", suggested one of the bulls. "If you please, in what way is the butcher any worse than the dealer who drove us hither with his cudgel?" replied the bulls, who had received their political education in Manuilsky's institute. [The Comintern.] "But we shall be able to attend to the dealer as well afterwards!" "Nothing doing", replied the bulls firm in their principles, to the counselor. "You are trying, from the left, to shield our enemies – you are a social-butcher yourself". And they refused to close ranks". See Leon Trotsky, "What Next? Vital Question for the German Proletariat", *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1932-ger/next03.htm>

5 Quoted in Rosa Meyer-Leviné, *Inside German Communism Memoirs of Party Life in the Weimar Republic* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), 177.

presidium of the ECCI states that the political line and the organisational policy followed by the CC of the Communist Party of Germany, with Comrade Thaelmann [sic] at its head, up to the Hitlerite coup, and at the moment when it occurred, was completely correct".⁶

For Trotsky, the Comintern's debacle in Germany was equivalent to the betrayal of the Second International in August 1914. Essentially, the Stalinist leadership of the USSR and the Comintern had not only failed a world-historic test; they proved completely incapable of drawing any critical balance sheet. This convinced Trotsky that the Soviet bureaucracy could not be reformed and led him to call for independent Marxist parties and a Fourth International to replace the Third. Losurdo and Rockhill portray the USSR and Stalin as an anti-fascist force, but they largely ignore how the Comintern helped Hitler rise to power in the first place.

3.3 Spain

In some ways, the Comintern's shift to the popular front after 1935 marked an even more epochal change than the Third Period. In the name of defending the Soviet Union and combating fascism, communist parties advocated "popular fronts" that included social democrats, liberals, and even conservatives. So long as they were "anti-fascist", communist parties were willing to form an alliance. This new line privileged the defence of "democracy" (while downplaying its class character) at the expense of socialist revolution. In addition, it also encouraged Communists to champion nationalism and retreat from the anti-imperialist struggle. As seen below, the popular front often meant that communists acted less as revolutionary vanguards than as brakes on mass struggle.

One of the supposed successes of the popular front occurred in Spain, which elected a left-leaning government in early 1936. By this point Spain was entering a pre-revolutionary situation, with strikes, land seizures, and clashes with the far right. The Spanish ruling class and military believed a communist revolution was imminent. To forestall it, General Francisco Franco led a military coup on 17 July 1936. The army seized large swaths of Spain but did not destroy the Republic. In fact, armed workers defeated the coup in key cities such as Madrid and Barcelona. Moreover, Franco's coup triggered the very revolution that he had hoped to stop.

The Spanish Civil War immediately assumed international dimensions. Both Hitler and Mussolini provided critical aid and supplies to Franco's Nationalists, while the Republic was blocked from buying the arms it needed abroad. The British and French formed a "Non-Intervention Committee" that hoped to contain the war to Spain but in practice hampered the Republic's fighting capacities. Germany and Italy ignored the committee and continued to support Franco. The Soviet Union emerged as one of the only major backers of the Republic,

6 "Resolution of the ECCI Presidium on the Situation in Germany—1 April 1933", in *The Communist International 1919–1943—Volume III: 1929–1943*, ed. Jane Degras (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 257.

sending in crucial supplies of arms and advisors. In addition, the Comintern organised the famed International Brigades: tens of thousands of Communists and anti-fascists who travelled to Spain and gave their lives fighting the Nationalists.

The Civil War helped the Communist Party of Spain (PCE) gain mass support. For one, they were identified closely with the Soviet Union – the Republic’s most substantial backer – and the PCE was second to none in its commitment to defeating Franco. Yet the PCE was not a driver of the revolution in the Republican Zone. In this, they followed the dictates of Soviet foreign policy and the popular front. The Soviet Union was determined to gain a military alliance with Britain and France to contain the fascist powers; to make an alliance viable, Stalin encouraged the PCE to hold back the revolution in Spain. Britain and France would be unlikely to aid Spain or align with the USSR if the latter appeared as a sponsor for proletarian revolution there. In December 1936, Stalin told the Socialist Spanish Prime Minister Largo Caballero to pursue a moderate path to win over the bourgeoisie and peasantry: “This is necessary in order to prevent the enemies of Spain from regarding her as a Communist Republic, and, in this way, to avoid their open intervention, which constitutes the greatest danger to Republican Spain”.⁷

In other words, the prestige of Stalin and the Comintern was deployed to buttress the reestablishment of bourgeois “order” and private property in Spain. Following this strategy meant that the PCE refused to support Moroccan independence, even though Morocco was a major base of support for Franco. But open anti-imperialism would only serve to antagonise Britain and France, who had vast holdings of colonial subjects in Africa. PCE leader José Díaz openly opposed Moroccan independence, proposing instead that Spain “extend its democratic regime to the colonial peoples who, like Morocco, are today victims of the deceptions and betrayals of Franco and his satellites, who force them to fight against us out of fear”.⁸

Even as he absolves the PCE, International Brigade member and Stalinist historian Arthur Landis admitted that the failure of the Republic and the Spanish left to call for Moroccan independence was a grave mistake: “The treatment of the just demands of the Moroccan Nationalists was one of the gravest errors committed by the Spanish Republic throughout the length of the war. It was unworthy of the Socialist leadership; in no way corresponded to the thinking of the masses of the people who had voted for the Popular Front, and was an affront to all those who at the time were shedding their blood in an anti-fascist, anti-colonialist

7 Quoted in Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 251. Bolloten’s work provides critical background on the factors that allowed for the PCE to gain hegemony in the Loyalist zone.

8 Quoted in Miguel Martín, *El colonialismo español en Marruecos (1860-1956)* (Ruedo Ibérico, 1973), 180. [Our translation] In addition, the PCE wanted to give Morocco to Britain and France in exchange for support. See Bolloten 1991, 181-82. As the French historian Pierre Broué notes, efforts by the revolutionary left to support a revolt in Morocco were rejected by the PCE and the Republican government for fear of offending the Western powers. See Pierre Broué and Émile Témime, *Revolution and Civil War in Spain* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008), 267.

cause”.⁹ It should be noted that neither Losurdo nor Rockhill – who present themselves as champions of anti-colonial struggles – are willing to make any admission about the PCE’s betrayal of Morocco during the Civil War.

Rockhill is correct that George Orwell ultimately threw in his lot with British intelligence. But if we want a non-reductive and dialectical approach to intellectuals, we should take Orwell’s journalism seriously – especially when he was committed to some version of independent socialism. Perhaps Orwell’s most important contribution was exposing Stalinist perfidy in Spain, and how verbal commitments to socialism and national self-determination were turned inside-out. Since Orwell was a member of the POUM, and they were labelled “fascists” by the Stalinists, perhaps Rockhill would have no qualms accepting Orwell as fascist in Spain. But against the PCE, Orwell was for Moroccan independence:

Why was there no rising in Morocco? Franco was trying to set up an infamous dictatorship, and the Moors actually preferred him to the Popular Front Government! The palpable truth is that no attempt was made to foment a rising in Morocco, because to do so would have meant putting a revolutionary construction on the war.¹⁰

By 1937, the PCE’s drive to restore “order” and roll back the revolution had placed it on a collision course with more radical groups, such as the anarchists and the semi-Trotskyist Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM). Though the POUM was dwarfed by the Communists and anarchists in terms of membership, it was anti-Stalinist, condemned the Moscow Trials, and advocated social revolution. The POUM even sought to offer Trotsky asylum in Catalonia. To Stalin, the possibilities of Trotskyists gaining power in parts of Spain seemed very real. At the end of 1936, the Comintern issued a directive to the PCE to eliminate the POUM:

Whatever happens the final destruction of the Trotskyists must be achieved, exposing them to the masses as a Fascist secret service carrying out provocations in the interests of Hitler and General Franco, attempting to split the Popular Front, conducting a slanderous campaign against the Soviet Union, a secret service actively aiding Fascism in Spain.¹¹

The conflict between the PCE and the anarchists/POUM came to a head in May 1937. In the radical hub of Barcelona, PCE police attempted to retake the telephone exchange controlled

⁹ Arthur H. Landis, *Spain: The Unfinished Revolution* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 192.

¹⁰ George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1952), 69-70. For more on Orwell’s ideological evolution in relation to Stalinism and the USSR, see Greene 2023, 11-22. For POUM’s advocacy of Moroccan independence, see POUM, “Morocco and Our Revolution”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/history/spain/poum/spanishrevolution/v1n9-dec-23-1936-Spanish%20Revolution.pdf>

¹¹ Quoted in Jonathan Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe 1933 – 39* (London: Palgrave, 1984), 116.

by the anarchists. This led to several days of fighting in the city before the radicals laid down their arms. In the aftermath, the POUM was condemned by the PCE for leading a “fascist putsch”. Leading Communists such as José Díaz demanded its suppression:

In Spain itself, who but the Trotskyists inspired the criminal putsch in Catalonia? *La Batalla* [POUM paper] in its 1 May edition was full of brazen incitements to revolt ... Well, this paper is still coming out in Catalonia ... Why? Because the government cannot make up its mind to seize it as every antifascist demands.

If, after ten months of war, a strong policy is not instituted to make the rear worthy of some of the fronts, I shall be forced to conclude, and I am sure every antifascist will be too, that unless this government imposes order in the rear another Popular Front government will have to do so.¹²

In the following months, the POUM was banned, its members arrested, and its leader Andrés Nin murdered in police custody.

The Barcelona May Days marked the nadir of the Spanish Revolution. While the Republic fought on for two more years, the struggle had lost much of its radical character. In the end, all the compromises, betrayals, and “realism” of the Comintern did not save Spain. Instead, the country endured decades of fascist repression. Given the war’s ignominious end, it is reasonable to ask if a more revolutionary and anti-colonialist line would have prevailed. In his critical study of the Comintern, former PCE member Fernando Claudín reaches this conclusion:

The spirit that made possible the defence of Madrid was that of the proletarian revolution, and if there was any possibility of victory it could be found only in the spreading and deepening of this spirit. But that necessitated the setting-up of a revolutionary proletarian government that would leave no room for doubt as to the aims of the struggle and would undertake with inflexible firmness the solution of the tasks imposed by the war – the organisation of the army and the production of armaments, the supplies needed, and so on, together with something that the government, concerned to restore the Republican state order, increasingly dominated by Azaña, Prieto and Co., who were exclusively preoccupied with resembling the ‘Western democracies’, did not contemplate and could never have contemplated, namely, the organising of large-scale revolutionary guerrilla activity in the areas dominated by the rebel generals.¹³

The irony of such a judgment from a former Stalinist is that it aligns on the whole with Trotsky’s own position during the Spanish Civil War, which called for revolutionary methods

¹² Quoted in Bolloten 1991, 463.

¹³ Fernando Claudín, *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform – Part One: The Crisis of the Communist International* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975a), 238.

and the liberation of “colonial slaves”.¹⁴ How Rockhill can fit all this into his preestablished “AES” schema, where AES is always aligned with the interests of the masses and the colonised, is beyond us.

3.4 France and Its Empire

In France, a Popular Front government was also elected in May 1936. The working class welcomed the new government with a general strike and factory occupations. Workers’ demands went beyond mere bread-and-butter issues and assumed a potentially revolutionary character. But the French Communist Party (PCF), which had grown immensely, rejected any revolutionary offensive. Its General Secretary Maurice Thorez said on 11 June: “To seize power now is out of the question ... the strike movement must be limited to the satisfaction of demands of an economic character”.¹⁵ Three days later, the PCF’s paper *L’Humanité* ran the headline: “The Communist Party Is Order!”¹⁶ Thorez declared on September 8: “The Communist Party had the courage to proclaim: it is necessary to know how to end a strike.”¹⁷ From a Marxist perspective, are these the words of communists – or of strike-breakers?

As part of its new parliamentary “respectability”, the PCF also dialled back its internationalism and draped itself in the French tricolour. As Thorez stated in January 1936: “The united front, the people’s front, the feeling of attachment to our country, the true unification of France—all these questions, already old or still quite new, had to be explained and interpreted by the central committee... We boldly deprived our enemies of the things they had stolen from us and trampled underfoot. We took back the *Marseillaise* and the tricolour”.¹⁸ Moreover, the PCF voted for the Franco-Soviet military alliance in 1934 and for conscription, in line with the interests of Soviet foreign policy. But again, from a Marxist perspective, should workers’ parties support imperialist militaries? Isn’t this a replay of the Second International’s August 1914 catastrophe?

Predictably, the PCF’s newfound patriotism pushed it toward opposing national liberation struggles in France’s colonial empire. Thorez even condemned anti-colonialism as a fascist plot! Instead of independence for the toiling subjects of the French Empire, the PCF promised a “fraternal union” that preserved colonial rule.¹⁹

14 Leon Trotsky, “The Lessons of Spain: The Last Warning”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1937/xx/spain01.htm>

15 Quoted in Daniel R. Brower, *The New Jacobins: The French Communist Party and the Popular Front* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 152.

16 Quoted in *ibid.* 153.

17 Quoted in Claudín 1975a, 210.

18 Executive Committee of the Communist International, “Extracts from an ECCI Message to the Eighth Congress of the French Communist Party”, Degras 1965, 384.

19 See Brower 1968, 105. In 1937, Thorez told the PCF that France had a special mission in the world and condemned anticolonial revolts as fascist plots: “Recalling the formulation of Lenin’s, we have already told the comrades from Tunis, who approve, that the right to separation does not signify the obligation to separate. If the decisive question of the moment is the victorious struggle against fascism, the interest of

Unsurprisingly, colonial populations were less enthused about “fraternal union” with French imperialism than Thorez was. Many anti-colonial activists who had previously supported the Comintern due to its anti-imperialist pledges felt utterly betrayed. The Syrian communist and future Ba’ath founder Michel Aflaq, then studying in France, broke with the PCF and with the Syrian-Lebanese Communist Parties over their support for continued French rule. Aflaq said in 1966: “During this period I admired the hardness of the Communists’ struggle against the French. I used to admire the toughness of the young men in the Communist Party. After 1936 and the assumption of power in France by the Léon Blum Front government, I became disenchanted and felt betrayed”.²⁰ This volte-face on the colonial question was a key moment of the Popular Front’s duplicity – one that Rockhill and Losurdo’s writing totally avoids. But the much maligned “Eurocentric” Trotsky was clear-eyed about what it meant:

The French Popular Front has signified, since its debut, that the Socialists and Communists placed their political activity under the control of the Radicals. The French Radicals represent the left flank of the imperialist bourgeoisie. On the banner of the Radical party are inscribed “patriotism” and “democracy”. Patriotism signifies defense of the colonial empire of France; “democracy” signifies nothing real...Everything will remain in place: property, democracy, colonies, and with them misery, high cost of living, reaction and the danger of war.²¹

3.5 United States of America

The Communist Party USA (CPUSA) was smaller than its European counterparts but also embraced the popular-front strategy. Before 1935, it had been at the forefront of many anti-racist, union, and unemployed struggles across the country. Yet the popular front marked a sea change in the CPUSA’s focus. The new line required the CPUSA to seek out “anti-fascist” allies, who would be friendly to the Soviet Union. The Communists supposedly found them in Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Party.

FDR – previously condemned by the party as an agent of Wall Street – was embraced as a champion of the common man.²² The CPUSA now found itself supporting the “liberal” wing of imperialism, i.e., the Democratic Party. During the 1936 elections, CP General Secretary

the colonial peoples lies in their unity with the French people and not in an attitude which could favor the projects of fascism and, for instance, place Algeria, Tunis and Morocco under the heel of Mussolini or Hitler, or make Indo-China a base for militaristic Japan.”To create the conditions for this free, confident and fraternal union of the colonial peoples with our people, is that not also to work toward the fulfillment of France’s mission in the world?” Maurice Thorez, *France of the People’s Front and Its Mission in the World* (New York: Workers Library Publishers Inc., 1938), 99.

²⁰ Quoted in Tariq Ali, *Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* (New York: Verso, 2003), 111.

²¹ Leon Trotsky, “The Decisive Hour in France”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/12/france.htm>

²² See the following example of the Daily Worker’s attitude condemning Roosevelt before the popular front: Daily Worker, “White House is Still a Wall Street Annex”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/dailyworker/1933/v010-n065-NY-mar-17-1933-DW-LOC.pdf>

Earl Browder was technically running, but in practice he was campaigning for Roosevelt. Later Browder explained his convoluted logic of supporting Roosevelt without endorsing him:

If we really wished to assure Roosevelt's reelection we could not endorse him because that would cause him to be labeled "the Communist candidate"... This would lose him many times as many votes from the "Right" as it would bring him from the "Left"... On the other hand we could put up our own candidate but conduct such a campaign that would assure Roosevelt all votes under our influence except the diehard opponents of all "capitalist" candidates... Thus I became the logical Communist presidential candidate and made my ambiguous campaign in favor of "my rival", Roosevelt.²³

Browder's support for Roosevelt meant that the CPUSA abandoned its political independence from bourgeois parties. The popular front inaugurated nearly a century in which the CPUSA functioned as loyal Democrats with Soviet allegiance. We would ask how Marxist-Leninists such as Rockhill square anti-imperialism with official Communist support for one of the foremost imperialist organisations in history.

Before the popular front, the CPUSA often led militant anti-racist struggles. For example, they led the fight to save the Scottsboro Boys and organised sharecroppers in Alabama who fought the Ku Klux Klan. This latter episode is admirably described in Robin D.G. Kelly's *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression*. However, the popular front pushed the party to retreat from its anti-racist commitments in order to ally with Southern Democrats. The Southern Democratic Party was a white supremacist organisation that upheld Jim Crow and refused to condemn lynching. But the CPUSA sought to ally with this reactionary apparatus. The Black communist member Harry Haywood recalled how the party dissolved its militant organisations to become more appealing to liberals:

The Party's work in the Black liberation movement felt the first effects of this retreat. Scarcely a year after the Seventh Congress called on communists to strengthen their own ranks and maintain the initiative within the united front, the US Party moved to liquidate a main revolutionary strongpoint of its work in the South, the militant and communist-led Sharecroppers Union... I believe that those responsible for liquidating the Sharecroppers Union were motivated by a sort of crude trade union economism, a desire to restrict the struggle of Black soil tillers to economic issues (as if this were possible) and a feeling that the existence of an independent and mainly Black union with the explosive potential of the Sharecroppers Union would frighten off our new democratic front allies: the Roosevelt New Dealers, the Southern moderates and the

²³ Earl Browder, "The American Communist Party in the Thirties", in Rita James Simon, ed., *As We Saw the Thirties: Essays on Social and Political Movements of a Decade* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969), 234.

CIO leadership... One could almost hear the opportunists sighing with relief upon the union's dissolution.²⁴

Despite these overtures to reaction, the CPUSA remained pariahs throughout the South, and the alliance with the liberals never amounted to much. Valuable work was destroyed for no gain.²⁵

During the Depression, the US labour movement grew more militant. Major strikes in 1934 in Minneapolis, Toledo, and San Francisco were all led by radicals. In the case of Minneapolis, this included Trotskyist leadership.²⁶ By 1936, the Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO) emerged, determined to organise major industries. The CPUSA had real influence within the CIO and was poised to become a leading force in the labour movement. In fact, it would have been entirely conceivable for a labour party to materialise and challenge both the Democrats and the Republicans.²⁷ While the labour bureaucrats resisted such a break, the CP potentially could have pushed for it. Instead, the CPUSA used its immense authority to discipline the labour movement and prevent any rupture with either the labour bureaucracy or the Democratic Party.²⁸ As labour historian Art Preis concluded, the alliance with the Democrats shackled the labour movement from realising its true potential:

The history of the CIO was to constantly appear as an admixture of two elements. On the one hand, mass organisation of the industrial workers was to lead to titanic strike battles, most often initiated by the militant ranks despite the leadership. On the other, the workers were to be cheated of many gains they might have won because of the intervention of the government which had the backing of the CIO leaders themselves. Unwilling to “embarrass” the Democratic administrations, forced by the very fact of their political alliance to cover up the anti-labor acts of the New Deal and Fair Deal regimes, the CIO leaders kept one arm of the CIO-its political arm-tied behind its back. Reliance on the capitalist government and on one of its major political wings crippled the CIO.²⁹

24 Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1978), 533.

25 Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 176-77.

26 For Trotskyists and the 1934 strike in Minneapolis, in particular see Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2004).

27 On the role of a labour party in revolutionary politics, see Trotsky's discussion with SWP leaders in Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder Press 1973), 113-124, 130-36, and 150-58.

28 On the labour struggles of the 1930s and the role of the Communist Party, see Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (New York: Verso, 2018), 56-100; David Milton, *The Politics of US Labor: From the Great Depression to the New Deal* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 182), 95, 107, 136-44; Charlie Post, “The Popular Front: Rethinking CPUSA History”, *Against the Current*, No. 63, July/August 1996. <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc063/p2363/>

29 Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step: The First Twenty Years of the CIO: 1936-55* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1974), 49.

The “crowning achievement” of the popular front was the drive to “Americanise” the Communist Party. In 1936, Browder coined the slogan “Communism is the Americanism of the Twentieth Century” where the party covered itself in the stars and stripes. At demonstrations, the party marched behind the flag, while its mass meetings had banners displaying Washington and Lincoln. The desire to “Americanise” the party and respectability politics went hand-in-hand with indifference to racism, alliance with bourgeois liberals, and a practical abandonment of revolution. In other words, “Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism” amounted to no communism at all.³⁰

3.6 Nazi-Soviet Pact

In the summer of 1939, Browder dismissed any rumours of a rapprochement between Germany and Russia by saying categorically: “There is as much chance of Russo-German agreement as of Earl Browder being elected President of the Chamber of Commerce”.³¹ While Browder was not appointed to the Chamber of Commerce, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union did sign a Non-Aggression Pact on 23 August 1939. One of its provisions was the division of Eastern Europe, including Poland, between the two countries. Against Stalinist narratives (e.g., Losurdo’s), the Pact was a move of cynical *Realpolitik* by the USSR that stunned and disoriented the communist parties of the world.

These organisations suddenly were forced to justify and rationalise the Soviet betrayal of the antifascist cause. The official line now held that the Pact was a brilliant move by Stalin to forestall war and defend peace. In December 1939, CPUSA leader William Z. Foster defended Soviet expansion into Poland in a pamphlet devoted to Stalin:

Undeterred by this defeat of the international peace front and the outbreak of the war, the Soviet Union, guided by the brilliant strategy of Stalin and the Communist Party, has developed a new policy in the struggle for world peace and democracy. As it has rapidly unfolded, this policy has amazed the world with its boldness, some of its major aspects being the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact, the smashing of the fascist Axis, the liberation of the White Russian and Ukrainian minorities in Poland, the armistice with Japan, and the mutual assistance pacts with the Baltic nations.³²

Jewish Communists were especially tormented by the Pact with antisemitic Nazis. Louis Gronowski, a French Jewish Communist, described his agony:

...this pact was repugnant to me, it went against my sentiments, against everything

³⁰ Davis 2018, 74-75. One joke from the 1930s and 40s went: how do you know a person is a CP member? Answer: They know all the lyrics to the *Star-Spangled Banner*.

³¹ Quoted in Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: the Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 387.

³² William Z. Foster, “Lenin and Stalin as Mass Leaders”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/foster/1939/12/stalin.htm>

I had maintained until then in my statements and writings. For all those years, we had presented Hitlerite Germany as the enemy of humanity and progress, and above all, the enemy of the Jewish people and the Soviet Union. And now the Soviet Union signed a pact with its sworn enemy, permitting the invasion of Poland and even taking part in its partition. It was the collapse of the whole argument forged over these long years. But I was a responsible Communist cadre, and my duty was to overcome my disgust.³³

In other words, party discipline overrode all principles, and loyalty to the USSR and Stalin counted above all.

The Pact also caused immense damage to resistance forces in fascist countries. For example, the KPD, which had been viciously persecuted by the Nazis, now found themselves upholding the Pact. In February 1940, KPD leader (and future head of East Germany) Walter Ulbricht wrote an article naming not Hitler, but opponents of the Pact as the main enemy, implying the need for German workers and communists to defend the Third Reich against the Allies:

When the middle-class papers declare in one article that England is fighting for freedom, and report in another article in the same paper the arrest of fighters for freedom, the muzzling of the workers' press, the establishment of concentration camps and special laws against the workers, then the German workers have the proof before their eyes that the ruling class in England is carrying on the war against the working class, and that, if Germany were conquered, the German working class would be treated in the same way.³⁴

In the same article, Ulbricht called upon German workers to defend the Pact and condemned any resistance to Hitler as playing into the Allies' hands. No wonder that dedicated anti-fascists were bewildered and demoralised by this turn.

In France, the PCF in line with the Pact refused to support the war effort; when France was occupied by the Germans in June 1940, the party largely laid low and did not engage in active resistance. In fact, the PCF hoped that by playing nice, the Germans would allow them to be a legal force. Towards this end, the PCF dispatched emissaries to meet with Otto Abetz, the German ambassador in Paris, for permission to resume publication of *L'Humanité*. The Germans refused – ironically sparing the PCF from writing apologetic drivel in defence of an alliance with fascism.³⁵

33 Quoted in Alain Brossat and Sylvia Klingberg, *Revolutionary Yiddishland: A History of Jewish Radicalism* (New York: Verso, 2016), 139-40.

34 Walter Ulbricht, "Article in *Die Welt* (2 February 1940)", *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/ulbricht/1940/die-welt.htm>

35 Olivier Wieviorka, *The French Resistance* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 35.

The Pact and its ramifications led to mass political disorientation and worldwide despair. For Communists who prided themselves on anti-fascism, it was an unconscionable slap in the face. On a dime, they abandoned their fighting anti-Nazi commitments because Stalin had signed a deal with Hitler. While the Nazi-Soviet Pact had parallels in earlier Anglo-French agreements with the Third Reich, what made it worse was that this *Realpolitik* was done under the banner of proletarian internationalism and the red flag.³⁶

Marxist-Leninists such as Losurdo claim that the Nazi-Soviet Pact was a strategically necessary move to afford the Soviet Union breathing space. Losurdo cites Mao's opinion that the Pact allowed the USSR to shift some focus away from the European theatre of war to better support China against Japan.³⁷ In reality, it freed up the Axis powers to conquer Europe and Asia. As part of its deal, the USSR supplied the Nazi war machine with vital raw materials and supplies. And, only two years later, in April 1941, the Soviets made a separate deal with Imperial Japan. But, contrary to Losurdo's rationalisations, to portray these Pacts as serving Chinese interests is utterly farcical. In making this pact with Japan, Stalin essentially recognised the puppet state of Manchukuo; indeed, all of these machinations were Stalin's gifts to Axis imperialism. Trotsky stated a year before his assassination how Stalin sought to maintain the status quo and protect his bureaucracy at all costs, becoming Hitler's ally: "If Stalin notwithstanding becomes Hitler's quartermaster, it signifies that the ruling caste is no longer capable of thinking about tomorrow. Its formula is that of all doomed regimes: "after us the deluge" ".³⁸ Thus, the alliance with fascism became one of the rotten fruits of "socialism in one country".

3-7 World War II

In another embarrassing about-face, the Communist Parties ended their support for the Pact with the Nazis on 22 June 1941, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Suddenly Hitler and Nazism became the main enemies across the board. Further, the character of the war was redefined from an inter-imperialist conflict to an anti-fascist people's war. As the CPUSA declared: "With the fullest support of all its people, the Soviet Government is now waging a struggle not only in defense of its socialist land but also in defense of the most vital interests of the peoples in all countries. It is waging a just struggle for the cause of the freedom of all nations and peoples".³⁹

36 For the disastrous results of the Pact on the USSR, see Greene 2023, 300-04.

37 Domenico Losurdo, *Stalin: History and Critique of a Black Legend* (Iskra Books, 2023), 183. See also Mao Zedong, "Interview with a *New China Daily* correspondent on the new international situation", *Marxists Internet Archive*. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_17.htm

38 Leon Trotsky, "On the War and the Soviet-Nazi Pact", *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1939/09/aboveall.htm>

39 Communist Party USA, "Support the USSR in its Fight Against Nazi War", *The Communist* (July 1941): 579. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/communist/v20n07-jul-1941-The-Communist-OCR.pdf>. In the flipflopping of the Soviet line on Nazi Germany, it is hard not to see where Orwell's parodies of the Ministry of Truth in his novel 1984 come from. One day, Oceania has always been at peace with Eastasia, and the next, it has always been war with them. Rockhill might call this "dialectics", but it

For the Soviet Union, the overriding priority was victory at any cost, and Communists everywhere were obliged to support that effort. That meant the goal was not world revolution but defeating fascism. As a goodwill gesture to the Allies, Stalin dissolved the Comintern in May 1943. When the war turned in the USSR's favour, Stalin agreed with the Allies to the division of Europe: the East would be dominated by the USSR, while the West would remain capitalist. Since Stalin was determined to keep his agreements with his bourgeois partners, Communists were expected to do the same. Deutscher observed how Stalin repeatedly urged Communists to ally with reactionaries:

He [Stalin] urged the French communists to take their cue from General de Gaulle at a time when they were the chief driving force behind the French Resistance. He urged the Italian communists to make peace with the House of Savoy and with the government of Marshal Badoglio, and to vote for the re-enactment of Mussolini's Lateran pacts with the Vatican. He did his best to induce Mao Zedong to come to terms with Chiang Kai-shek, because he believed, as he said at Potsdam, that the Kuomintang was the only force capable of ruling China. He angrily remonstrated with Tito because of the latter's revolutionary aspirations, and demanded his consent to the restoration of the monarchy in Yugoslavia... He stared with incredulity and fear at the rising tides of revolution which threatened to wash away the rock of 'socialism in one country', on which he had built his temple. This so-called prophet of Marxism and Leninism appears at this moment as the most conservative statesman in the world.⁴⁰

In Axis-occupied countries, Communists played leading roles in the armed resistance. Party discipline and cadre structures made them uniquely suited to underground and illegal work, and many partisans were drawn by the revolutionary vision of a liberated society. One Italian partisan, Aligi Barducci, was described as motivated by the need to fight both fascism and the capitalist world that engendered it: "Sure, he was fighting against the Nazi-Fascist enemy, but in his blazing red shirt he was considered, and rightly so, the combatant of a 'greater war', that of all the oppressed against the oppressors, of poverty against wealth, of justice against injustice".⁴¹ By the war's end, Communists globally had hundreds of thousands of partisans

more closely resembles what Orwell called "Doublethink", or the pseudodialectics of Stalinist pragmatism. While Deutscher was highly critical of Orwell, he acknowledged that Orwell's despair in socialism and turn to the right stemmed from his experiences with Stalinism during the Spanish Civil War and his horror at the purges. See Isaac Deutscher, "1984 – The Mysticism of Cruelty", *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/deutscher/1955/1984.htm>

40 Isaac Deutscher, "Russia After Stalin", *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/deutscher/1953/russiaafterstalin.htm>; On the later anti-Tito campaign carried out by Stalin, see Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 593-96. Tito was aware of Stalin's attempts to assassinate him and sent a telegram to Moscow in 1950: "Stalin. Stop sending assassins to murder me. We have already caught five, one with a bomb, another with a rifle ... If this doesn't stop, I will send one man to Moscow and there will be no need to send another". Zhores A. Medvedev and Roy A. Medvedev, *The Unknown Stalin* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2003), 62.

41 Claudio Pavone, *A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2013), 430.

under arms and were serious contenders for power.

However, even though many partisans desired socialism, the Communist Parties were not fighting for it. Almost everywhere, they formed broad “national fronts” stressing national liberation rather than socialist revolution. For instance, the Greek Communist Party (KKE) declared its intention to unite all patriots against the invader: “The KKE supports by all possible means the struggle for national liberation, and will do all in its power to help gather all the patriotic forces into one unbreakable national front, which will unite the whole people to shake off the foreign yoke and to win national liberation at the side of our great Allies”.⁴² In a telegram, Thorez instructed PCF cadres not to frame the war as a revolutionary overturn of capitalism: “Insist yet again on absolute necessity in all your agitation to avoid presenting German war against Soviet Union as a war between capitalist system and socialist system. For Soviet Union it’s a national war of defense against fascist barbarism. Chatter about world revolution serves Hitler and harms international rallying of all anti-Hitlerite forces”.⁴³

As a result, when the Axis powers were defeated, Communist Parties laid down their arms and surrendered any opportunity for revolution, compromising with bourgeois forces to restore “order”. In Italy, Communist Party leader Palmiro Togliatti supported the Lateran Accords with the Vatican and amnestied fascists. In France, the PCF accepted ministerial positions in De Gaulle’s Provisional Government, refused to support colonial independence, and disarmed its partisans.⁴⁴

In Greece, the KKE had effectively liberated the country from the Axis in 1944. Nevertheless, Greece fell under British influence, and the KKE was ordered to stand down. In January 1945, it signed a treaty with the British-backed government, agreeing to demobilise their armed units in exchange for amnesty and a referendum on the monarchy. Upon hearing about the treaty, partisan leader Aris Velouhiotis wrote a letter to the Central Committee of the KKE denouncing the sell-out:

Why did you do this? Where are we going? Why did we shed so much blood? Why did they burn our houses for three years? Why are you handing us over without a battle? What are we going to do now? Where is our popular justice, our self-government?... Reaction has raised its head... You don’t see any of this. You have been isolated from the popular masses and you have lost their pulse. Wake up. Even at this late stage it’s not too late, but soon it will be and we will then need massive sacrifices in blood and toil. Don’t let reaction permanently gain a foothold.⁴⁵

42 Quoted in Pierre Broué, “How Trotsky and the Trotskyists Confronted the Second World War”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/backiss/vol3/no4/brouww2.html>

43 Maurice Thorez, “Liberation France is Linked Victory Soviet Union”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/thorez/1941/victory-soviet.htm>

44 For the PCF and PCI’s postwar sellouts, see Fernando Claudín, *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform – Part Two: The Zenith of Stalinism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975b), 316–70.

45 Aris Velouhiotis, “Last Letter of Aris Velouhiotis to the Central Committee of the KKE”, *Marxists Internet*

Only a year later, repression of the KKE would lead to civil war in Greece. Yet Stalin refused to intervene. As he told Georgi Dimitrov: “I advised not starting this fighting in Greece... They’ve taken on more than they can handle. They were evidently counting on the Red Army’s coming down to the Aegean. We cannot do that. We cannot send our troops into Greece, either. The Greeks have acted foolishly”.⁴⁶

Only in Yugoslavia and Albania did partisans take power – largely because they liberated themselves and ignored “fraternal” Soviet advice to refrain. But, elsewhere, Moscow subordinated revolutionary initiatives to prosecuting the war, condemning colonial uprisings against the “democratic” Allies in the name of unity. The Communist Party of India (CPI) declared that the Soviet Union was “the only Fatherland of the proletariat” and backed the British war effort.⁴⁷ When nationalists led by Nehru and Gandhi launched the Quit India movement in 1942, demanding an immediate end to British rule, the CPI not only opposed the campaign but actively collaborated with the British authorities to suppress it. In March 1943, CPI General Secretary Puran Chand Joshi sent a letter to the colonial administrator Reginald Maxwell, detailing their actions to disrupt the Quit India movement: “We have fought the fifth column politically and practically and our policy has been so effective that the main theme of the Congress Socialists and Forward Bloc illegal hand bills and journals is ‘The struggle failed because of Communists’ treachery...’”⁴⁸ The Communist Party of India’s abandonment of the independence struggle ensured that the bourgeois nationalists became the hegemonic force in the movement and thus the principal rulers of India after 1947.

What happened in India was not an aberration in the colonial and semi-colonial world. Similar patterns appeared elsewhere: in Mandatory Palestine, the Communist Party of Palestine (PCP) encouraged its members to enlist in the British armed forces and toned down its criticisms of Zionism. The PCP also called upon Jewish workers “to fulfil their sacred duty ... in the great antifascist front of the Anglo-Soviet alliance”.⁴⁹ The British government did not legalise the PCP, but noted that “the general attitude of the PCP and its members is irreproachably pro-British”.⁵⁰ Iraqi communists issued a statement of support for the British

Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/velouchiotis/1945/03/24.htm>

46 Georgi Dimitrov, *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov 1933 – 1949*, ed., Ivo Banac (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 352-53. For more background on the Greek Civil War, see Doug Enaa Greene, “Struggle and suffering: The 1946-49 Greek Civil War”, *LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewal*, July 17, 2015. <https://links.org.au/struggle-and-suffering-1946-49-greek-civil-war>

47 Communist Party of India, “The People’s War against Hitler Fascism”, *Class Struggle*. <https://classstruggle.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/cs-fed-2022-article-Hitler.pdf>

48 Quoted in Arun Shourie, *The Only Fatherland: Communists, ‘Quit India’ and the Soviet Union* (Noida: Harpercollins Publishers India, 2014), 69. The CPI went on and said that they were the only party in India fighting the “fifth column”: “From the ranks of the people we are the only political party that FIGHTS [caps in original] the fifth column. Government repression feeds the fifth column, our propaganda and work isolate the fifth column from the honest patriots... The National War Front line does not touch the fifth column while our policy makes it squeal...” Ibid.

49 Musa Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party 1919-1948: Arab and Jew in the Struggle for Internationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010), 88.

50 Quoted in *ibid.*

colonial government and war effort in May 1942: “[O]ur party regards the British army, which is now fighting Nazism, as an army of liberation...we must, therefore, help the British army in Iraq in every possible way”.⁵¹ In Latin America, the Cuban Communists (renamed the Popular Socialist Party in 1944) also participated in the government of Fulgencio Batista from 1943-1944.⁵²

In the Philippines, the Communist Party (PKP) formed Hukbalahap, or the Huk guerrilla movement, to fight the Japanese occupiers. The Huks built up a strong base of support on the island of Luzon. During the war, the Huks fought alongside the American military against their common enemy. As American forces retook the Philippines, they proceeded to disarm the Huks and arrest their leaders. Many Huks and their sympathisers were subjected to a reign of terror by US forces. Huk leader Luis Taruc later admitted that the guerrillas had been politically disoriented, having been told that the Americans would arrive as liberators:

We had left our people unprepared for what to expect from the return of the Americans. That is why our soldiers, gladly greeting the GIs and fighting beside them, were stunned when the same GIs turned around and disarmed them, arrested them, and permitted them to be massacred... Most tragic of all were the people who supported our struggle against the Japanese but who welcomed the Americans and the regime which they later dictated. It would take bitter years before they would see the vulture disguised as an eagle. For the benefit of the CIC [Counter-Intelligence Corps], which arrested and investigated us: our crime was not that we were anti-imperialist, but that we were not anti-imperialist enough.⁵³

In the Allied countries, Communists were hyper-focused on winning the war at all costs to the detriment of any other struggles. In Britain, the Communist Party (CPGB) went from condemning Winston Churchill as a warmonger to enthusiastically championing him. In *Britain's Chance Has Come*, CPGB leader Harry Pollitt urged unity behind Churchill: “There can be only one consideration, whether the people mean to defeat Hitler or openly or covertly endeavour to sabotage the common victory of the British and Soviet people. This is why a fight for a united national front means support for Churchill’s government and all measures of a common victory...”⁵⁴ Pollitt’s nationalist position dovetails to a great degree with Orwell’s “patriotic socialism” in the latter’s *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941). Orwell’s wife, Eileen Blair,

51 Ilario Salucci, *A People's History of Iraq: The Iraqi Communist Party, Workers' Movement, and the Left 1923-2004* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 23.

52 Steve Cushion, *The Hidden History of the Cuban Revolution: How the Working Class Shaped the Guerrilla Victory* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016), 21.

53 Luis Taruc, *Born of the People* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973), 207. For background on US intervention in the Philippines, see William Blum, *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* (London: Zed Books, 2004), 38-43.

54 Quoted in Robert Black, *Stalinism in Britain: A Trotskyist Analysis* (London: New Park, 1970), 151. For more on Churchill during World War II, see Tariq Ali, *Winston Churchill: His Times, His Crimes* (New York: Verso, 2022), 228-333.

described the intent of the essay as “how to be a socialist while Tory”.⁵⁵ This is close to Pollitt’s attempt at being a Communist while supporting imperialist Tories, like Churchill.

Trotskyists – and anyone who supported strikes in war industries or advocated expanded trade union rights – were denounced by Stalinists as little better than fascists. Another CP pamphlet, *Clear Out Hitler’s Agents* by William H. Wainwright went so far as to call for physically removing Trotskyists from the labour movement: “Be on the alert for the Trotskyist disrupters. These people have not the slightest right to be regarded as workers with an honest point of view. They should be treated as you would a Nazi. Clear them out of every working class organisation”.⁵⁶

In the United States, the CPUSA wrapped itself in the banner of “American democracy” while simultaneously condemning struggles for racial equality. The “Double V for Victory” campaign, launched by Black activists, linked victory against fascism abroad with victory against racism at home. Nevertheless, the party regarded this effort as potentially pro-fascist. In the October 1941 issue of *The Communist*, James Ford wrote that “it would be equally wrong to press these demands without regard to the main task of the destruction of Hitler, without which no serious fight for Negro rights is possible. Both would play into the hands of the appeasers, the Trotskyites and traitors”.⁵⁷

While the CPUSA deplored Axis colonialism, it opposed demands for Puerto Rican independence. Instead, the party argued that Puerto Ricans should back the US government as part of a common struggle against fascism. The Communist Party highlighted its support for the US and urged Puerto Ricans to join the US military. According to the Puerto Rican communist Juan Santos Rivera, “[o]ur soldiers march to the battle fields of Europe and the Pacific along with the US armed forces ... because Puerto Ricans understand we need to join with [those fighting] the war[s] of national liberation because that is the only way to obtain and guarantee freedom for all peoples, including our own”.⁵⁸ Naturally, Puerto Rican party members dutifully enlisted. In addition, communists backed the Popular Democratic Party (PPD) and its leader Luis Muñoz Marín. The PPD was the Puerto Rican bourgeois party closest to the United States. As Rivera put it: “[The PPD stood for] the interests of the Puerto Rican national bourgeoisie ... [that] in this historical moment, coincide with the immediate interests of the working and peasant class”.⁵⁹

Nor did the CPUSA protest against Japanese internment; it actually expelled its Japanese-American members. The party also routinely published racist caricatures of the Japanese in

55 DJ Taylor, *Orwell: The New Life* (London: Constable, 2023), 13.

56 Quoted in Black 1970, 190-91.

57 James W. Ford, “Some Problems of the Negro People in the National Front to Destroy Hitler and Hitlerism”, *The Communist* Vol. 20, No. 10 (October 1941): 889.

58 Quoted in Margaret Power, “The Challenges and Complexities of Anti-fascist Politics in Colonial Puerto Rico, 1935 – 1945”, *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* Vol. 48, No. 3 (2023): 404.

59 Quoted in *ibid.* See also Rafael Bernabe, *Obstinate Star: A History of the Puerto Rico Independence Movement* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2026), 294-95.

The Daily Worker. The culmination of this chauvinism was a cartoon celebrating the 1945 Soviet declaration of war on Japan and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as “the old one-two”. The incineration of hundreds of thousands of people by atomic weapons was described by *The Daily Worker* as “The Super-Duper Week”.⁶⁰

During the war, organised labour agreed to a “no strike pledge” in key industries. But this did not stop workers from launching unauthorised strikes in defence of their economic interests. The CPUSA used its immense power in the labour movement to enforce the no-strike pledge. When the 500,000 members of the United Mine Workers struck in April 1943 over lagging wages and unsafe conditions, the Roosevelt Administration placed the mines under federal jurisdiction. The miners refused demands to return to work. In May, Browder declared the striking miners to be in league with fascism:

It is clear by now that we are not dealing with misguided or short-sighted men who are just swept away by the pressure of a mass resentment of the labor movement because of an accumulation of grievances. We are dealing with a well-developed, organised conspiracy against the war, to prevent the solution of the grievances of labor and then to manipulate those grievances in order to whip up strike sentiment and a strike movement among the workers of this country, all directed toward one specific purpose—to create a crisis in the United States that will prevent the opening of the second front in Europe which will crack Hitler in 1943.⁶¹

Communist Party members also enlisted in the American armed forces in large numbers. According to Foster in his official history of the CPUSA: “No organisation in the country made a better record in the people’s war than did the Communist Party and the Young Communist League. They gave 15,000 of their men and women members to the armed services. On the battle fronts the fighters conducted themselves with characteristic Communist courage and devotion”.⁶² However, the American military was not a red army, but an imperialist force. As enlisted soldiers, these party members helped to reconquer American colonies in the Pacific

60 See Tony Pecinovsky, “On 4th of July, remember CPUSA’s commitment to patriotism”, *People’s Weekly World*, July 2, 2015. <https://peoplesworld.org/article/on-4th-of-july-remember-cpusa-s-commitment-to-patriotism/>; See the account of Japanese-American and CPUSA member Karl Yoneda who was interned during the war along with his wife Elaine. Vivian McGuckin Rainieri, *The Red Angel: The Life and Times of Elaine Black Yoneda* (New York: International Publishers, 1991); For the CPUSA’s racist caricatures and celebration of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, see “The Old One-Two” *The Daily Worker*, August 10, 1945, 5. https://archive.org/details/per_daily-worker_daily-worker_1945-08-10_22_191/page/n4/mode/1up and “The Super-Duper Week”, *The Daily Worker*, August 11, 1945, 6. https://dn721907.ca.archive.org/0/items/per_daily-worker_daily-worker_1945-08-11_22_192/per_daily-worker_daily-worker_1945-08-11_22_192.pdf Nor was the US CP alone in supporting the bomb. A year later, CPGB member William Paul claimed: “All intelligent people know that the atomic bomb helped to shorten the war and thus saved millions of lives”. William Paul, “Atomic Energy and Social Progress”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/paul-william/pamphlets/1946/atomic.htm>

61 Earl Browder, “The Strike Wave Conspiracy”, *The Communist* Vol. 22, No. 6 (June 1943): 493.

62 William Z. Foster, *History of the Communist Party of the United States* (New York: International Publishers, 1952), 409.

(e.g., the Philippines and Guam) and ensure US dominance in Western Europe.⁶³

Earl Browder championed class collaborationism between workers and capitalists, stating in 1943: “If J.P. Morgan supports this coalition and goes down the line for it, I as a Communist am prepared to clasp his hand”.⁶⁴ After the Tehran Conference in 1943, cooperation between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union was at its zenith. Browder believed that this would usher in a post-war era of peace and class harmony: “Capitalism and Communism have begun to march together towards the peaceful society of tomorrow”.⁶⁵ In May 1944, the CPUSA dissolved and reconstituted itself as the Communist Political Association, intended to function as a pressure group supporting progressive candidates and US-Soviet cooperation.

Later party histories would blame Browder alone for liquidating the CPUSA as an independent vanguard organisation and its abandonment of Marxism. But these policies were not his invention. They flowed from the popular-front line articulated at the Comintern’s Seventh Congress in 1935 and were expanded under wartime conditions. Browder’s approach faithfully represented the Soviet line during the war, specifically for the US but also for the Allied “democracies”. In April 1945, the Soviets criticised him as a revisionist through the PCF leader Jacques Duclos.⁶⁶ In short order, the CPUSA was restored and Browder expelled.

In reality, Browder was not removed for revisionism but because the Soviet line changed quickly as the wartime alliance with the United States began to fracture. The Soviets judged that he could not execute the necessary turn for the looming Cold War. But it did not matter if he was willing to make the needed about-face or politically readjust in the nick of time. His name was too closely associated with these liquidationist policies, and thus he had to take the fall for them, as just another CP patsy. Yet even after his expulsion, Browder remained a

63 For American imperialist ambitions in Europe and Asia during and after World War II, see David Horowitz, *Free World Colossus: A Critique of American Foreign Policy in the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965) and Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War: the World and United States Foreign Policy, 1943-1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990). In contrast to the pro-imperialism of the Moscow-line Communist Parties, the Fourth International adopted the “proletarian military policy” in response to World War II. This was a series of transitional demands that included trade union control of military training and the election of officers. This policy recognised many workers sincerely wanted to fight fascism, but that bourgeois-imperialist states would be incapable of doing so in a revolutionary manner. For details, see Leon Trotsky, “On Conscription”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1940/07/lettero4.htm> ; Prometheus Research Library, “Documents on the”Proletarian Military Policy”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/icl-spartacists/prs2-pmp/index.htm> ; Socialist Workers Party, “‘Proletarian Military Policy of the Socialist Workers Party,’ Adopted at the S.W.P. National Conference from Socialist Appeal. 4 No. 40. October 5, 1940”, *Revolution’s Newsstand*. <https://revolutionsnewsstand.com/2023/05/21/proletarianmilitarypolicyofthesocialistworkersparty-adoptedat-the-s-w-p-national-conference-from-socialist-appeal-4-no-40-october-5-1940/>

64 Earl Browder, “Tehran: History’s Greatest Turning Point”, *The Communist* Vol. 23, No. 1 (January 1944): 8.

65 Quoted in Claudín 1975b, 395.

66 For the Duclos letter, see Jacques Duclos, “On the Dissolution of the Communist Party of the United States”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/cpusa/1945/04/0400-duclos-ondissolution.pdf> ; For background see James G. Ryan, *Earl Browder: The Failure of American Communism* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1997), 246-53, 255, 256, 260-65.

stalwart Stalinist, forever loyal to the USSR.⁶⁷

Unlike World War I, which was fundamentally an inter-capitalist dogfight, World War II had multiple dimensions. In his study of the war, Ernest Mandel identified five major aspects. The first was an inter-imperialist struggle between the Allied and Axis powers; the second, a struggle between the USSR and Nazi Germany; the third, the Chinese fight against Imperial Japan; the fourth involved Asian colonies fighting for liberation, and the fifth and final aspect was armed resistance by various partisan forces, often possessing a revolutionary character.⁶⁸

With Mandel's framework in mind, the Soviet Union's fight against Nazi barbarism was absolutely justified and necessary. But serving in imperialist armed forces for the redivision of the world was not. Anti-imperialist struggles were justified against both the fascist and "democratic" imperialists. When judging imperialism for Mandel, location matters: Hitler is a menace in Belgium, but so is Churchill in Bengal. Stalinist parties did not navigate these contradictions well and often prioritised old-fashioned European chauvinism over anticolonialism and proletarian internationalism. What was tragic about the Second International was downright farcical with the Third, but no less devastating for the prospects of socialism in Europe and across the globe. What Losurdo and Rockhill condemn Kautsky and Bernstein for in 1914 should equally apply to Stalin and Thorez in 1941.

3.8 Israel-Palestine

The Communist Party of Palestine (PCP) was formed in 1923 to promote Jewish and Arab unity against British colonialism and separatist Zionism. Like other Communist Parties, the PCP was subject to the shifting lines of the Comintern.⁶⁹ It moved from denouncing Arab nationalists in the 1920s to tailing them in the 1930s. But, with the outbreak of the Second World War, the PCP underwent severe political convulsions. The party confused its Arab members by encouraging them to join the British armed forces and also began softening its

67 In 1946, Molotov, Stalin's righthand man, rewarded Browder by appointing him as "American Representative of the State Publishing House" for publication of Soviet books in the United States. See Philip J. Jaffe, *The Rise and Fall of American Communism* (New York: Horizon Press, 1975), 141-42. In Browder's debate with Max Shachtman at Webster Hall in March 1950, the sad irony of Browder's loyalty was highlighted by Shachtman: "When I saw [Browder] standing there at the podium, I said to myself: Rajk was the general secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party, and was shot, or hanged, or garrotted. Kostov was the general secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party. And when I thought of what happened to them, I thought of the former secretary of the American Communist Party, and I said to myself: There-there but for an accident of geography, stands a corpse!" See Earl Browder, C. Wright Mills & Max Shachtman, "Is Russia a Socialist Community?" *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/shachtma/1950/03/russia.htm>

68 Ernest Mandel, *The Meaning of the Second World War* (New York: Verso, 1986), 45.

69 Members of the PCP who lived in the USSR were swept up in the purges of the 1930s. These included Joseph Berger, a founder of the PCP who spent 20 years in a gulag. See Joseph Berger, *Shipwreck of a Generation: The Memoirs of Joseph Berger* (London: Harvill Press, 1971). In addition, Leopold Trepper, who was the main leader of the Red Orchestra spy ring that helped the USSR win World War II was arrested upon returning to Moscow in 1945. He spent the next ten years in Soviet prisons. See Leopold Trepper, *The Great Game: Memoirs of the Spy Hitler Couldn't Silence* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977).

opposition to Zionism. This led to a split in 1943 with the formation of the National Liberation League (NLL), composed largely of Arab Communists. While the NLL was more oriented toward the Arab population, it shared the same Stalinist outlook as the PCP.

After the war, the British presence in Mandatory Palestine became increasingly untenable, and Zionist militias were determined to seize control of the region. In this environment, the PCP and the NLL initially supported Arab and Jewish unity. However, they were thrown for a major loop in November 1947 when Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet Permanent Representative to the United Nations, supported the partition of the region into separate Zionist and Arab states. This went against decades of official Soviet foreign policy against Zionism. The Soviet shift was motivated by the hope of expelling the British Empire from the Middle East and securing a potential pro-Soviet ally in a newly independent Israel.

The full impact of this shift did not register immediately, but both the NLL and the PCP eventually fell into line. The PCP renamed itself the Communist Party of the Land of Israel (MAKEI), adopting for the first time the Hebrew name for the country – Eretz Israel – used by the Zionist movement. They also encouraged their members to join the Haganah, one of the main armed Zionist groups.⁷⁰

When Israel was created on 14 May 1948, both the Soviet Union and the United States were the first two countries to recognise it in the UN. The newly formed country owed much of its existence to both the USSR and the Eastern Bloc. The MAKEI, with the full support of the Israeli leadership, worked to ensure the flow of weapons to Israel. Through Czechoslovakia, the Eastern Bloc supplied the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) with \$12 million worth of weaponry, including 24,500 rifles, 5,200 machine guns, and 54 million rounds of ammunition.⁷¹ Without this crucial support of arms, the IDF would not have triumphed so easily in 1948. Finally, MAKEI General Secretary Meir Vilner was one of the 37 signatories of the Israeli Declaration of Independence.⁷²

The NLL also supported partition, claiming that it would only be a “temporary measure”. In October 1948, the NLL, along with the Communist Parties of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon issued a joint statement condemning the Arab invasion of Palestine and supporting the creation of Israel. The communiqué declared:

The Palestine war was a direct result of the fierce struggle between England and the United States, who caused the war in order to exploit it to settle accounts between them ...The Palestine war revealed finally and completely the betrayal of the reactionary

⁷⁰ Joel Beinin, *Was the Red Flag Flying There? Marxist Politics and the Arab-Israeli Conflict in Egypt and Israel 1948-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 47.

⁷¹ Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (London: Oneworld, 2006), 44 and 268.

⁷² See “The Signatories of the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel”, *Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/signatories-of-the-declaration-of-the-establishment-of-the-state>

rulers in the Arab states and their complete submission to foreign imperialism.⁷³

The Arab parties defended the Soviet line on partition, and their statement made no mention of Israel or criticised Zionism. With the exception of Iraqi CP General Secretary Yusuf Salman Yusuf, all the Arab Communist Parties supported Soviet recognition of Israel.⁷⁴

For all of Losurdo and Rockhill's anti-Zionist rhetoric, neither seriously confronts the Stalinist record in the Middle East. If Losurdo criticises the Frankfurt School's pro-Israeli politics – and even likens Adorno and Horkheimer's support for the 1967 war to an "August 4th 1914" level of betrayal – then what of Stalin's policy?⁷⁵ What of the role of "Actually Existing Socialism" in cementing the division between Arab and Jewish workers? Squaring the circle on this issue would be quite the Orwellian feat of doublethink.

3.9 Algeria

At its founding in 1920, the PCF inherited the pro-colonial outlook of the Second International and refused to support Algerian independence. At the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, Trotsky condemned the pro-colonial outlook of the PCF:

The Fourth Congress once again calls attention to the exceptional importance of correct and systematic work by the Communist party in the colonies. The congress sharply condemns the position of the Communist section in Sidi-Bel Abbès [of the PCF section in Algiers], which employs pseudo-Marxist phraseology to cover up a purely slaveholder's point of view, fundamentally supporting the imperial rule of French capitalism over its colonial slaves. The Congress considers that our work in the colonies should be based not on forces that are so imbued with capitalist and nationalist prejudices, but, rather, on the best forces among the indigenous people themselves, and above all, among the indigenous proletarian youth.⁷⁶

73 Quoted in Beinin 1990, 53.

74 Tariq Ali, *Bush in Babylon: The Recolonisation of Iraq* (New York: Verso, 2003), 64.

75 Losurdo 2024a, 126-30.

76 John Riddell, ed., *Towards the United Front Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922* (Boston: Brill, 2012), 1131.

At the same congress, Trotsky urged the PCF to reassess its approach to supporting Algerian independence:

"Only an irreconcilable struggle against colonial slavery by the Communist Party in the motherland and a systematic struggle in the colonies themselves can weaken the influence of ultra-nationalist forces among the oppressed colonial peoples among the working masses, win these masses' sympathy for the cause of the French proletariat, and thus make it impossible for French capitalism to utilise the indigenous proletariat in the colonies as a final reserve of counter-revolution. The Fourth World Congress calls on the French Party and its Central Committee to devote incomparably more attention, resources, and means than before to the colonial question and to propaganda in the colonies.

"It calls especially for the Central Committee itself to establish a permanent bureau for work in the colonies, drawing into this representatives of indigenous Communist organisations". *ibid.*

Despite early Comintern pressure, the PCF never fully shook off its pro-colonialist attitude. As noted earlier, it embraced the French Empire during the Popular Front. And on 8 May 1945 – the day the war ended in Europe – an uprising in Sétif against the French colonial administration was met with a police massacre that killed tens of thousands of Algerians. The PCF called the demonstrators fascist provocateurs: 'the Hitlerite killers who took part in the events of May 8th and the pseudo-nationalist leaders ... have tried to deceive the Moslem masses ... in their attempt to create a rupture between the Algerian and the French peoples'.⁷⁷

Nor was Algeria the only example of the PCF's support for the French Empire. In the aftermath of the war, the party became a central component of the French government, with Maurice Thorez serving as deputy prime minister from 1946 to 1947. In their ministerial capacity, the PCF backed the French war effort against their own sister party in Indochina. When the French bombarded Haiphong in November 1946, PCF deputies voted against war credits, while the party's government ministers approved them.⁷⁸ Only after the PCF was kicked out of the government in 1947 did they oppose the French war effort in Southeast Asia.

On 1 November 1954, the Front de libération nationale (FLN) launched an armed insurrection in Algeria. The PCF condemned the FLN's actions as adventurist. In March 1956, as the war in Algiers intensified, Socialist prime minister Guy Mollet called for emergency powers to crush the rebels. The PCF delegates voted unanimously in favour of the government's measure. Their statement declared: "We are for the existence and permanence of political, economic, and cultural bonds between France and Algeria...Peace must be re-established in Algeria..."⁷⁹

The Socialist and future French President François Mitterrand praised the PCF's "realism" and sense of responsibility regarding French interests in Algeria: "When I saw the communists vote in favor of the special powers [to fight the Algerian FLN], knowing how they really felt, I understood just how responsible and serious this party was".⁸⁰

Only later did the PCF belatedly and half-heartedly support Algerian independence. The FLN militant and intellectual Frantz Fanon sharply criticised the PCF's chauvinist attitude in ways that echo Trotsky's earlier arguments. Given how often Trotsky is painted as a "Eurocentrist" as opposed to Fanon, Fanon's position against Actually Existing Stalinist practice is worth quoting at length:

The Communist Left, for its part, while proclaiming the necessity for colonial countries to evolve toward independence, requires the maintenance of special links with France. Such positions clearly manifest that even the so-called extremist parties consider that

77 Quoted in David Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals 1914-1960* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964), 208.

78 Ibid. 210 and Black 1970, 221.

79 Quoted in Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2006), 137.

80 Ian Birchall, *Bailing Out the System: Reformist Socialism in Western Europe, 1944-85* (London: Bookmarks, 1986), 97.

France has rights in Algeria and that the lightening of domination does not necessarily imply the disappearance of every link. This mental attitude assumes the guise of a technocratic paternalism, of a disingenuous warning against the danger of regression... The demand for special links with France is a response to the desire to maintain colonial structures intact. What is involved here is a kind of terrorism of necessity on the basis of which it is decided that nothing valid can be conceived or achieved in Algeria independently of France. In fact, the demand for special links with France comes down to a determination to maintain Algeria eternally in a stage of a minor and protected State. But also to a determination to guarantee certain forms of exploitation of the Algerian people. It is unquestionably proof of a grave failure to understand the revolutionary implications of the national struggle.⁸¹

In the meantime, intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre were risking a great deal by publicly supporting the FLN. If Losurdo dismisses Sartre's stance as "idealist", then what of the PCF's pro-colonialist position?⁸² Who was closer to French conservatism, Sartre or the Stalinists, when the PCF voted for special powers to keep Algeria French – *L'Algérie est française et le restera*? In contrast to the PCF, French Trotskyists were not only agitating for the FLN, but manufacturing weapons for them.⁸³ Again, when it comes to Algeria, who are the real chauvinists: the PCF, with Thorez as deputy prime-minister, or the Trotskyists? Losurdo and Rockhill's efforts to paint Trotskyism as inherently Eurocentric are constantly refuted by these concrete historical examples.

3.10 1968

The 1960s were an era of student rebellion, upheaval, and radical possibility. No place experienced a greater revolutionary opportunity than France in May 1968. While the French events shared the same kind of student radicalism found in the United States, West Germany, Italy, Czechoslovakia, Japan, Mexico, and Brazil, they also expanded into a massive general strike by the working class. In that sense, the French May uniquely challenged the bourgeois order in one of the major industrial heartlands of capitalism.

By the late 1960s, the PCF was one of the largest political forces in France, routinely winning more than a fifth of the electorate, controlling the major trade unions, and – at least on paper – committed to socialist revolution. Yet, when the students clashed with the police, the PCF condemned them as ultraleftists who were objectively serving the interests of President Charles De Gaulle. On May 3 1968, PCF leader – and true spiritual heir to Thorez – Georges Marchais wrote in *L'Humanité*:

81 Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 87-88.

82 Losurdo 2024, 134-37.

83 In particular, see Ian Birchall, ed., *European Revolutionaries and Algerian Independence: 1954 – 1962* (London: Merlin Press, 2012).

[These students] are also trying to give lessons to the working class. More and more they are to be found at factory gates or in areas inhabited by immigrant workers distributing leaflets and other propaganda... These false revolutionaries must be energetically unmasked; for, objectively, they serve the interests of the Gaullist government and the big capitalist monopolies... The views and activity of these “revolutionists” are laughable; in as much as they are generally the children of big bourgeois, contemptuous of students from working-class origins, who will soon dampen their “revolutionary flame” to go and run papa’s business and exploit the workers in the best traditions of capitalism.⁸⁴

Over the course of May and June, the working class joined the fray, with more than 10 million on strike and occupying their factories. While workers considered anti-capitalist alternatives, the PCF did its utmost to keep the demands strictly “reasonable”. It also used its influence in the trade unions to keep workers separated from student radicals. As the historian David Caute noted, the PCF consistently acted in defence of French capitalism: “The [French] Communist Party was profoundly Gaullist, devoted to ‘order,’ to authority, to transmitting commands from above, to the cult of personality, to channeling popular aspirations into tidy ‘agreements.’”⁸⁵

While Rockhill, in his article for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, points out that Michel Foucault was politically Gaullist prior to May ’68, he does not pass an equally vehement judgment against the PCF’s own Gaullism. Regarding Rockhill’s criticisms of the “gauchiste” and “culturalist” tendencies within the student movement, what was the actual roadblock towards socialist revolution in May ’68: the “ultraleft” students (whom Rockhill amalgamates with Trotskyists) or the Stalinists?⁸⁶

While the far left – Trotskyists, Maoists, and anarchists – attempted to provide leadership to the May events, they were too small to lead a revolution. By contrast, the PCF had the social weight to challenge the bourgeoisie, but they never posed the question of overthrowing capitalism. Instead, they acted as the main obstacle to revolution. Daniel Singer, who wrote the seminal history of May 1968, concluded with the following judgment of the PCF:

Between the promise of a new French revolution and its fulfillment stands the French Communist party. The PCF has appeared from the beginning of this story as the villain,

84 Quoted in Ian Birchall, “FRANCE 1968: ‘All power to the imagination!’” in Colin Barker, ed., *Revolutionary Rehearsals* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2002), 29-30.

85 David Caute, *The Year of the Barricades: A Journey Through 1968* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 250.

86 See Gabriel Rockhill, “Foucault: The Faux Radical”, *The Philosophical Salon*, October 12, 2020. https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/foucault-the-faux-radical/?fbclid=IwAR3RA_8YDdIAHl77HUQf5YPz-6Tlfjz2MH9KJc1Vut_026GzA2oroxel3BA and Gabriel Rockhill, “The Myth of 1968 Thought and the French Intelligentsia: Historical Commodity Fetishism and Ideological Rollback”, *Monthly Review* Vol. 75, No. 02 (June 2023). <https://monthlyreview.org/articles/the-myth-of-1968-thought-and-the-french-intelligentsia-historical-commodity-fetishism-and-ideological-rollback/>

as the main obstacle to a revolutionary conclusion, or, depending on your stand point, as the hero, the unexpected pillar of the regime, the surprising darling of the traditional upholders of capitalist society... The negative hero was not a clumsy and inefficient participant in the May Movement. It was a conscious opponent, throwing from the start the might of its machine across the path that might have led in a revolutionary direction.⁸⁷

Despite Sartre's theoretical and political weaknesses, he was right to point out the counterrevolutionary character of the PCF in May '68: "In particular, as long as the French Communist Party is the largest conservative party in France, and as long as it has the confidence of the workers, it will be impossible to make the free revolution that was missed in May".⁸⁸

3.11 China – Nixon

In February 1972, US President Richard Nixon visited Mao Zedong in Beijing. This historic meeting ended decades of American hostility towards China. The United States sought rapprochement with China in order to isolate the Soviet Union and facilitate its exit from the Vietnam War. For his part, Mao's meeting with Nixon was hypocritical, since he had just previously condemned the Soviets for softening their opposition to American imperialism.

However, the theoretical rationale for China's opening to the Americans can be found in their polemics against the post-Stalin USSR. Although allied after the founding of the PRC in 1949, relations declined sharply after Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956. By the early 1960s, the Sino-Soviet alliance had broken down, and by decade's end the two powers were engaged in open-border clashes.

In their anti-Soviet polemics, the Chinese had originally warned that Khrushchev's leadership was revisionist. As these polemics intensified, Mao warned that the restoration of capitalism in the USSR was imminent. After the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, Premier Zhou Enlai declared the Soviet Union was now a "social-imperialist power".⁸⁹ Two years later, in 1970, China went further, announcing that the Soviet Union had become fully fascist: "The Soviet Union today is under the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, a dictatorship of the big bourgeoisie, a dictatorship of the German fascist type, a dictatorship of the Hitler type".⁹⁰

But China continued to describe both the USSR and the USA as equally dangerous imperialist powers. At the Ninth Congress of the CPC in April 1969, Lin Biao outlined the "four major

87 Daniel Singer, *Prelude to Revolution: France in May 1968* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), 276 and 280.

88 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism* (New York: Verso, 2008), 60. For Sartre during May 1968 and its aftermath, see Ian Birchall, *Sartre Against Stalinism* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 211-18.

89 *Total Bankruptcy of Soviet Modern Revisionism* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1968), 4.

90 Renmin Ribao, Hongqi, and Jiefangjun Bao, *Leninism or Social-Imperialism? — In Commemoration of the Centenary of the Birth of the Great Lenin* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1970), 14. Mao is alleged to have made that remark in May 1964. See *ibid.* 60.

contradictions” in the world system:

... there are four major contradictions in the world today: the contradiction between the oppressed nations on the one hand and imperialism and social-imperialism on the other; the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in the capitalist and revisionist countries; the contradiction between imperialist and social-imperialist countries and among the imperialist countries; and the contradiction between socialist countries on the one hand and imperialism and social-imperialism on the other.⁹¹

Despite initially placing the US and the USSR on the same footing, this shifted within two years. The United States came to be described as a “waning” superpower and a secondary enemy. According to Mao’s distinction between primary and secondary contradictions, this made the USSR the principal strategic enemy, and the main blow should be directed against it. This provided a theoretical justification for the Sino-American alliance following Nixon’s visit.⁹²

The outgrowth of this foreign policy shift became known as the “Three Worlds Theory”. But the origins of this idea can be traced to Mao’s 1963 discussion of “intermediate zones” between the USA and USSR:

In my view there are two intermediate zones: the first, Asia, Africa and Latin America and the second, Europe. Japan and Canada are not happy with the United States. The six-nation Common Market, represented by De Gaulle, is made up of powerful capitalist countries. Japan in the East is a powerful capitalist country. They are unhappy with the US and the Soviet Union. Are the Eastern European countries that satisfied with Khrushchev of the Soviet Union? I don’t believe so. Things are evolving and contradictions are revealing themselves.⁹³

The Three Worlds Theory reached full maturation in Deng Xiaoping’s 1974 speech to the United Nations:

Judging from the changes in international relations, the world today actually consists of three parts, or three worlds, that are both interconnected and in contradiction to one another. The United States and the Soviet Union make up the First World. The

91 Lin Biao, *Report to the Ninth National Congress of the Communist Party of China* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1969), 81-82. For the Byzantine circumstances surrounding Lin Biao’s death, see Jaap van Ginneken, *The Rise and Fall of Lin Biao* (New York: Penguin, 1977).

92 On the sophistical nature of Mao’s dialectics, see the following: Raya Dunayevskaya, “50 years after the revolution – Mao, Hegel, and dialectics in China”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/dunayevskaya/works/1957/maos-dialectics.htm>; Raya Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy and Revolution: From Hegel to Sartre, and from Marx to Mao* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1982), 151-87.

93 Mao Zedong, “There Are Two Intermediate Zones”, in *Mao Zedong on Diplomacy* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1998), 387.

developing countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and other regions make up the Third World. The developed countries between the two make up the Second World.⁹⁴

The Mao-Deng formula held that the USA and USSR were superpowers that constituted the First World and were the main enemies of humanity; developed countries in Western Europe, Japan, Canada and Oceania represented the Second World, while the Third World represented the majority of the world's peoples. Therefore, Mao and Deng argued it was possible for the Second and Third Worlds to unite in a common front against the two superpowers.⁹⁵ Significantly, the Three Worlds Theory meant that China no longer considered itself part of the "socialist camp", but located itself in the Third World. While the US and USSR were both accused of "hegemonism", the latter was deemed the more proximate danger, making "tactical" unity with the United States possible.

The results of the Chinese pivot to the Americans had a disorienting effect on many Maoist sympathisers. China now supported strengthening NATO in order to deter the Soviets. In the "Third World", it quickly found itself backing various reactionary bourgeois forces. For example, China materially supported the Sri Lankan government's 1971 crackdown against "Trotskyite" protesters. In Iran, it backed the American-supported Shah. When the Socialist Salvador Allende was overthrown by the CIA on 11 September 1973, China was not only among the first governments to recognise Pinochet, but its embassy – along with the American one – was closed to refugees. It also cut off aid to revolutionaries in Oman who were fighting the Iranian-backed government.

During the Portuguese Revolution of 1974, China backed the pro-NATO, CIA-aligned Socialist Party against the forces of Soviet "social-imperialism". When the Cuban and Soviet-backed MPLA took power in Angola in 1975, China found itself allied with Apartheid South Africa in support of the anti-communist UNITA. China also abandoned its support for Palestinian rights and endorsed restrictions imposed by certain Arab governments. They also cultivated friendly relations with Filipino dictator Ferdinand Marcos as he fought local Maoists. Finally, Chinese support for the United States meant the de facto abandonment of Vietnam.⁹⁶

The Three Worlds Theory was socialism in one country with Chinese characteristics. For one, it grew out of the same nationalist outlook that informed Stalin's original iteration. Like the

94 Deng Xiaoping, "Speech at Special Session of UN General Assembly", in *And Mao Makes Five: Mao Tse-tung's Last Great Battle*, ed. Raymond Lotta (Chicago: Banner Press, 1978), 491.

95 For an example of this thinking, see Communist Committee, "The Soviet Union: Is it the Nazi Germany of Today?" *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-5/ussr-nazi.htm>; In line with this approach, French Maoists condemned Trotskyist attempts to undermine the French army since this weakened France against Soviet social-imperialism. See Livio Maitan, *Party, Army and Masses in China: A Marxist Interpretation of the Cultural Revolution and its Aftermath* (London: New Left Books, 1976), 346.

96 For a fuller listing of the twists and turns of Chinese foreign policy during the late 1960s and early 1970s, see Maitan 1976, 309-48; Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che* (New York: Verso, 2002), 213-14, 223, 230, and 256; Nigel Harris, *Mandate of Heaven: Marx and Mao in Modern China* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), 265-82.

USSR, China treated its own national interests as paramount over those of world revolution. But unlike the Soviet version, the Three Worlds Theory employed Mao's understanding of contradiction to provide a philosophical veneer for its rapid strategic zigzags. But the practical result was largely the same: political disorientation, retreat, and betrayal.

Mao's understanding of foreign affairs also emphasised the supposed "revolutionary" credentials of various Third World national leaders. In effect, class differences between exploited and exploiters were blurred or erased in the Third World. Rather than presenting workers and other oppressed groups as the primary revolutionary agents, this role was increasingly assigned to the "national bourgeoisie". In other words, the effacement of class produced a false unity between proletarian and bourgeois interests. In the language of Maoist "dialectics", as long as the proletariat and the bourgeoisie inhabited the same Third World nation, the contradiction between them could be redefined as "non-antagonistic". China elevated to a categorical principle the need for workers to back their national bourgeoisie in order to advance the global revolutionary struggle. In practice, crass *realpolitik* displaced class struggle, internationalism, and anti-imperialism.

For a genuinely Marxist standpoint, left-nationalist governments in the Third World remain integrated into the structures of global imperialism. They are not, in principle, opposed to capitalism or imperialism. Internationalism requires opposing all imperialist attacks on these countries. But when Marxists extend solidarity, it is not toward ruling classes – which can include anticommunist mullahs – but to the working masses themselves. Uncritical defence of ostensibly "anti-imperialist" national leaders, by contrast, is not only short-sighted but creates political confusion. Instead of advocating the creation and support of independent Marxist parties, Stalinist tendencies lapse into tailism and liquidationism: salvation is sought in existing counterrevolutionary bureaucracies, national bourgeois regimes of any stripe, or – as we learned with late Maoism – even in US imperialism. For the Stalinist, the self-emancipation of the working class only exists in a red heaven. Down here on earth, we are told to be "realistic", and to emphasise "the primacy of practice".

4 The Prophet Smeared

What Rockhill calls “Imperial Western Marxism” also includes Really Existing Trotskyism. To avoid any misunderstanding regarding his views on Trotskyism and Trotsky himself, we will quote Rockhill verbatim. First comes the claim that the politics of Trotskyism led directly to a pro-imperialist outlook:

Non-communist Marxists were particularly useful because their expertise in Marxism could be mobilised to understand and fight the enemy, while their anticommunism helped guarantee their ultimate fealty to the bourgeois state (although there are some exceptions). This was not only true in the case of the Frankfurt School but more generally, so much so that some scholars talk—with plenty of evidence to support this claim—of a Trotskyism-to-CIA pipeline. One of the objectives of the US national security state was to wage a highly sophisticated intellectual world war on Marxism, driving a wedge between its supposedly authentic and respectable Western forms, on the one hand, and its purported perversions in the East, where it became a material reality instead of a pristine system of ideas. The Frankfurt School, like the dominant forms of Trotskyism in the imperial core, played an important role in this war.¹

Despite asserting that there is “plenty of evidence”, Rockhill provides no substantiation whatsoever for the claim of a “Trotskyism-to-CIA pipeline” or for the alleged anticommunist role of Trotskyists in imperialism. There are no quotes, no footnotes, no evidence of any kind. It is a dogmatic assertion that echoes 1930s-style Stalinist demonisation.

The clearest refutation of these claims can be found in the final struggle of Leon Trotsky himself. From 1939-40, Trotsky argued with his dissenting followers such as Max Shachtman and James Burnham over the class nature of the Soviet Union. In the wake of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, Trotsky maintained that the USSR remained a degenerated workers’ state and must be defended against imperialism, which he regarded as the paramount enemy. By contrast, both Shachtman and Burnham contended that the USSR had become a new class society – indeed, an imperialist power – which did not merit any socialist support.² Ultimately, Shachtman and Burnham lost the struggle and departed the Trotskyist movement, while Trotsky spent his last year defending the USSR against his own fellow party members. As

¹ Rockhill 2025, 261.

² On Shachtman’s ideological evolution from Trotskyism to the social-democratic right, see Doug Greene, *A Failure of Vision: Michael Harrington and the Limits of Democratic Socialism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2022), 25-35. For Burnham’s right-wing evolution see Daniel Kelly, *James Burnham and the Struggle for the World: A Life* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2002).

for the subsequent evolution of Shachtman and Burnham toward the political right, that coincided with their rejection of virtually everything Trotsky stood for.

Rockhill's allegation of a Trotskyism-to-CIA pipeline resembles Bush-era claims of a Trotskyist-to-neoconservative pipeline. This charge is also baseless, if not itself a right-wing talking point.³ The overwhelming majority of the neoconservatives were never Trotskyists of any sort. The few who were former Trotskyists such as Irving Kristol, Maurice Seymour Lipset, and Gertrude Himmelfarb were only briefly in the movement and quickly aligned with the "Shermanites" (oriented toward Shachtman). They very soon developed an anti-Leninist and pragmatist outlook influenced by Robert Michels and eventually rejected Trotsky altogether.⁴ Their trajectory paralleled James Burnham's own embrace of Michels' elitism in his anti-Marxist book *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom* (1943).

For Trotskyists, or any leftist, to become a neoconservative meant completely abandoning any trace of revolutionary Marxism. The neocon-Trotskyism stereotype originates in paleoconservative rhetoric – often tinged with antisemitism – that sees both as globalist, internationalist, and rootlessly cosmopolitan. As Richard Seymour pointed out: "The entire schema of neoconservatism as the heir of Trotskyism is chimerical, in fact: it operates through a metonymic substitution of imagery..."⁵ This substitution creates a false analogy, if not identity, between Dick Cheney's Project for a New American Century and the theory of permanent revolution. Because Neoconservatism is (falsely) alleged to be globalist, it is depicted as a right-wing version of Trotskyism.

When Stalinists commit this fallacy, they echo palaeocons like Patrick Buchanan or conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones. Buchanan once claimed: "As Leon Trotsky believed in advancing world communist revolution, neocons and democratists believe we have some inherent right to intervene in nations that fail to share our views and values."⁶ Jones went further on his *Info Wars* program. After claiming that the American deep state has been thoroughly infiltrated by "Trotskyites", he lamented that Stalin had failed to finish the job of murdering them all.⁷

While some former Trotskyists have embraced reactionary positions, they are by no means the only left current to have produced notorious renegades. Former Maoists, for instance,

3 In particular, see the image at the top of the following article. Grover Furr, "Anatomy of an Incompetent and Dishonest Trotskyite", *Attack Neodemocracy*, January 12, 2025. <https://neodemocracy.blogspot.com/2025/01/anatomy-of-incompetent-and-dishonest.html>

4 Martin Krygier, *Philip Selznick: Ideals in the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 20.

5 Richard Seymour, *The Liberal Defence of Murder* (New York: Verso Books, 2008), 153.

6 Pat Buchanan, "Our innocents in the Middle East", *New Hampshire Union Leader*, January 3, 2012. https://www.unionleader.com/opinion/columnists/our-innocents-in-the-middle-east/article_448ee8f7-feb3-53b5-8dca-cff42c76ce27.html

7 YoureAllLosers0x0, "In which Alex Jones discovers post-Trotskyism (neoconservatism) and becomes a Stalinist", *Reddit*, September 30, 2021. www.reddit.com/r/redscarepod/comments/pytoaf/in_which_alex_jones_discovers_posttrotskyism

include many Democratic Party activists in the United States, the pro-imperialist *nouveaux philosophes* in France, and Stéphane Courtois, editor of *The Black Book of Communism*. Official Marxism-Leninism has also generated its fair share of defectors, such as Whittaker Chambers (author of *Witness* and a founder of *National Review*), Jacques Doriot (a Nazi collaborator), and Jay Lovestone (who put the CIA in AFL-CIO). If, according to Rockhill's logic, there is a direct pipeline to imperialism via Trotskyism, then there are equally well-travelled routes from AES to reaction. To quote *Pilgrim's Progress*: "I saw there was a way to Hell even from the gates of Heaven".⁸

The second major accusation made by Rockhill concerns Trotsky's alleged willingness to collaborate with the US government by donating his archives and offering to testify before the Dies Committee in 1939:

It is interesting to note that [William] Langer met with Leon Trotsky in Mexico and was responsible for arranging for his papers from his exile period in Mexico to be archived at Harvard. See Winks, *Cloak and Gown*, 73. On Trotsky's willingness to collaborate with the US government (such as with the anticommunist Dies Committee), his dependance {sic} on US funds and personnel, and his interest in going to the United States, see William Chase, "Trotsky in Mexico: Toward a History of His Informal Contacts with the US Government, 1937 – 1940", published (in Slovak) in *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, Vol. 4 (July/August 1995): 76 – 102 (English version obtained directly from the author).⁹

To begin with, there was nothing underhanded about the donation of Trotsky's archives to Harvard. As a political exile perpetually short of funds, he arranged the transfer in order to secure financial support. At the same time, he ensured that any potentially sensitive materials regarding his political comrades would be sealed until at least 1980. William Langer was an intelligence agent during and after the war, but those agencies did not exist in the 1930s. At the time, Langer was a prominent Harvard historian, and Trotsky spoke with him in that academic capacity. There is no credible basis for imputing a conspiracy between Trotsky and the American government based on these facts. Thus, this charge amounts to absolutely nothing and is hypocritical – particularly given that numerous Stalinist organisations have donated their archives to "bourgeois" universities without such actions being construed as CIA plots. Needless to say, there is nothing nefarious about the CPUSA donating its archive to NYU's Tamiment Library.

The accusation regarding Trotsky's supposed willingness to work with the Dies Committee

8 For Courtois, see Greene 2023, 76–79. On Chambers, John V. Fleming, *The Anti-Communist Manifestos: Four Books that Shaped the Cold War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 267 – 346; On Doriot see Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years 1940–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 78 – 9, 94, and 568; On Lovestone, see Ted Morgan, *A Covert Life: Jay Lovestone: Communist, Anti-Communist, and Spymaster* (New York: Random House, 1999).

9 Rockhill 2025, 289. See also William J. Chase, "Trotsky as an Informer in Pursuit of US Visa", *Neodemocracy*, March 22, 2021. <https://neodemocracy.blogspot.com/2021/03/trotsky-as-informer-in-pursuit-of-us.html>

is more serious. The Dies Committee (more popularly known as the House Un-American Activities Committee – HUAC) was formed in 1938 to investigate radical “subversion” in the USA, particularly from the political left. Shortly after the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the Committee conducted hearings that involved leading CPUSA members such as Earl Browder and William Z. Foster. During these hearings, both men used the occasion to condemn Trotsky as a counterrevolutionary.¹⁰

Following these hearings, Martin Dies – the chair of HUAC – extended an invitation on 12 October 1939 for Trotsky to testify. Trotsky was fully aware of HUAC’s reactionary nature yet agreed to do so. His aim was to rebut slanderous charges and planned to use HUAC as a public platform to expose the Stalinist persecutions before a wider public. But Trotsky did not intend to become a state witness and imposed explicit conditions before he appeared. For one, he would not call for repression against the CPUSA, and two, he wanted his testimony to be seen before the whole world.

The Dies Committee backtracked on their invitation and wanted Trotsky to give written testimony from Mexico. Trotsky refused this, stating:

Mr. Dies says that he may send an investigator to Mexico to “take Trotsky’s statement”. But I never invited his representative to Mexico, irrespective as to whether or not he presented me with an assurance that he would be permitted to return to the United States. I agreed only to make a public deposition before a committee of the House of Representatives with the full possibility of elucidating all obscure questions through cross-examination. If Mr. Dies wishes my opinions in written form only, he can read my books.¹¹

Dies and the US government refused Trotsky’s conditions. The historian Pierre Broué maintains that the invitation was finally withdrawn because Dies did not want a revolutionary to be given a platform in Washington DC: “The State Department considered Dies’s initiative imprudent, deemed it dangerous to give Trotsky such a prominent platform, and asked Dies

¹⁰ As Browder told HUAC: “The Chairman: You believe that the Trotskyites are all bad? Mr. Browder: They are all bad. The Chairman: In other words, nothing anybody can say for them. Mr. Browder: You can list all the cuss words together in describing them”.

See House of Un-American Activities, “Investigation of un-American propaganda activities in the United States. Hearings before a Special Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, Seventy-fifth Congress, third session-Seventy-eighth Congress, second session, on H. Res. 282, to investigate (1) the extent, character, and objects of un-American propaganda activities in the United States, (2) the diffusion within the United States of subversive and un-American propaganda that is instigated from foreign countries or of a domestic origin and attacks the principle of the form of government as guaranteed by our Constitution, and (3) all other questions in relation thereto that would aid Congress in any necessary remedial legislation”, *Archive.org* (p. 441). <https://archive.org/details/investigationofu194007unit/page/n5/mode/1up> See also Pierre Broué, *Trotsky* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), 724.

¹¹ Leon Trotsky, “Statement on Dies Backing Down”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1939/12/dies3.html>

to back down. Dies cancelled everything through *United Press* dispatches, then announced that he would send his investigators to Trotsky, to which the latter retorted that he would not receive them: the matter was settled".¹² James Burnham in 1939 and some Trotskyists objected to the Old Man appearing before the Dies Committee, as it would open the movement to Stalinist attack. But Trotsky was a master polemicist and accomplished public speaker, who understood how to turn a hostile forum to his advantage.

While Rockhill reproaches Trotsky for an appearance that never took place, he ignores the fact that prominent Marxist-Leninists such as Earl Browder and William Z. Foster willingly testified before the same committee and denounced Trotsky as a fascist. The obvious question for Rockhill is why is Trotsky singled out for condemnation while others receive a free pass? Is this not a striking instance of double standards?

The article by William Chase, on which Rockhill relies, indulges in a great deal of speculation without facts about Trotsky's motives. One conjecture is that Trotsky *might* have compromised the USSR or the Comintern's operations with his prospective Dies testimony. But opposed to Chase, Trotsky's political activity and public statements indicate no intention of doing so. Indeed, the accusation that Trotsky would sabotage the Soviet Union comes straight out of Vyshinsky and the Moscow Trials. There is not a shred of proof to back this up.

Chase further speculates that Trotsky wanted an American visa. Certainly, his own safety was a major concern. Hounded from country to country by both bourgeois governments and Stalinist parties, America was an enticing prospect for political asylum. And, given the strength of the Trotskyist movement there, he could reasonably expect stronger protection. But, if Trotsky was absolutely single-minded on obtaining a visa, he would not have stipulated so many political conditions on testifying. When those conditions were not met by the Dies Committee, he refused to go. Thus, the claims by Chase and Rockhill that Trotsky was engaged in some sort of covert manoeuvring are baseless.

While Rockhill makes unsubstantiated claims of Trotsky's complicity with the state, he forgets that the CPUSA *actually* did support bourgeois repression of the Trotskyists. In June 1941, leaders of the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) were arrested for violating the Smith Act. They were charged with advocating the overthrow of the American government – or, in other words – socialist revolution. By this point, the Soviet Union was at war with Germany and the CPUSA saw any opposition to the war effort as treasonous. To that end, the CPUSA supported Federal prosecution, with CP leader Milton Howard describing the SWP as “a fascist fifth column” who “deserve no more support from labor and friends of national security than do the Nazis”.¹³ Eight years later, when CPUSA leaders themselves were convicted under the same law, the SWP unequivocally defended their civil liberties, and called for solidarity

¹² Broué 1988, 724. [Our translation]

¹³ Quoted in Donna T Haverty Stacke, *Trotskyists on Trial: Free Speech and Political Persecution Since the Age of FDR* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 79.

against state repression. The SWP's magazine *The Militant* declared without hesitation: "The conviction on that day of 11 Communist Party leaders in the political trial at Foley Square struck a hammer-blow against the democratic liberties of the whole working-class". Or, as the headline put it even more bluntly: "CP Trial Verdict Hits Rights of All".¹⁴

Rockhill starts his book with an extended discussion of Che Guevara, his assassination, and the publication of his diary. In this, he contrasts Trotskyism as politically abstract, Eurocentric, and (objectively) pro-imperialist. This includes, without citation, the allegation that Ernest Mandel celebrated the demise of the USSR in 1991.¹⁵ Rockhill ignores that one of Che's main economic advisers in the "Great Debate" (1962-1965) concerning socialism in Cuba was Mandel himself. Meanwhile, in Bolivia, the Communist Party under Mario Monje refused to support Che's guerilla campaign. In fact, most of the Latin American Communist Parties were committed to a two-stage theory of development and refused to support armed revolution backed by Cuba.¹⁶

Mandel was not without flaws, and his illusions about Gorbachev's *Perestroika* merit criticism. Nevertheless, considering Mandel's agreement with Trotsky that the USSR was still a workers' state – however degenerated – it would be out of character for him to celebrate and gloat over its demise. As he warned in 1991 at a Moscow news conference in front of Soviet media, "it is certain that if the Soviet economy becomes privatised, the USSR will become a Third World country, not a Sweden or a Finland".¹⁷ This was not the voice of someone applauding neoliberal reforms, American-style shock therapy, or the presidency of Vladimir Putin. When it comes to Putin, one cannot say the same of Rockhill, who depicts the Russian president as playing a progressive role on the world stage in opposition to imperialism.¹⁸

Last – but not least – is the charge that Trotskyism is inherently Eurocentric. Echoing Losurdo, Rockhill often casts Trotskyism as a pseudo-Marxism of the imperial core opposed to the colonised periphery.¹⁹ But Trotsky's anti-colonialist and anti-chauvinist positions are abundantly clear throughout his life. At the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in 1922, he condemned pro-colonial socialists in the harshest terms and wanted them cast out of the

14 The Socialist Workers Party, "CP Trial Verdict Hits the Rights of All", *The Militant*, October 24, 1949, 1. www.themilitant.com/1949/1343/MIL1343.pdf

15 Rockhill 2025, 323.

16 As Che himself said about Monje and the Bolivian CP in January 1967: "As I expected, Monje's position was at first evasive and then treacherous. The party has taken up arms against us and I do not know where this will lead, but it will not stop us and maybe, in the end, it will be to our advantage (I am almost certain of this). The most honest and militant people will be with us, although they are going through a more or less severe crisis of conscience". Ernesto Che Guevara, *The Bolivian Diary* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 78. For more background on the Latin American CPs and the pro-Cuban guerrillas see Richard Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1970).

17 Ernest Mandel, "Ernest Mandel in Moscow", *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mandel/1991/01/moscow.html>

18 Critical Theory Workshop. "Multipolarity and the Role of the Left—Gabriel Rockhill Compilation". *YouTube*. July 14, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CgOd4HoWkHs>.

19 Rockhill 2025, 261.

movement.²⁰ As we have seen elsewhere, he castigated the PCF for their chauvinism and “slaveholder’s mentality”. In the ranks of the international communist movement, Trotsky was unequivocal in supporting national liberation struggles.

In his 1933 letter to South African revolutionaries, Trotsky explicitly linked the class struggle with national liberation from imperialism:

The historical weapon of national liberation can be only the class struggle. The Comintern, beginning in 1924, transformed the program of national liberation of colonial people into an empty democratic abstraction which is elevated above the reality of class relations. In the struggle against national oppression different classes liberate themselves (temporarily) from material interests and become simple “anti-imperialist” forces.²¹

In the colonial world, where Stalinist parties often assumed a prolonged “democratic stage” in alliance with the national bourgeoisie, Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution rejected such Menshevik-like stageism. Far from being Eurocentric, it insisted that socialist revolution could emerge in the periphery prior to the imperial core – a perspective borne out, in important respects, by revolutions in China, Cuba, and Vietnam.²²

Contrary to the claim that Trotskyism is confined to the imperial centres, it has been a genuine international current from its inception. Alongside strong movements in the United States and France, there have also been vibrant Trotskyist parties in Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Bolivia, Argentina, China, Peru, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. These movements have faced repression not only from bourgeois and imperialist forces, but also from Stalinism. Vietnamese Trotskyist leaders Phan Văn Hùm and Tạ Thu Thâu built a major working-class base in Saigon, but, following the August Revolution of 1945, they were both executed by Ho Chi Minh’s Viet Minh. Chinese Trotskyists endured long-term prison sentences under both Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong. Not too long after the 1949 revolution, Mao jailed the Trotskyists *en masse*, all of whom were dedicated revolutionaries. Zheng Chaolin spent at least 34 years in Chinese prison, rivalling the record of the nineteenth century French revolutionary Louis-Auguste Blanqui.²³

Even the early Comintern struggled with entrenched racism in the Communist Parties. One notorious example occurred during the Rand Rebellion of 1922, when the South African party

20 Riddell 2012, 828.

21 Leon Trotsky, “Letter to South African Revolutionaries”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1933/04/safrica.html>

22 See Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution & Results and Prospects* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970); Michael Löwy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution* (London: Verso, 1981); Greene 2022, 185-92.

23 Gregor Benton, *Prophets Unarmed: Chinese Trotskyists in Revolution, War, Jail, and the Return from Limbo* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 1067.

displayed the slogan “Workers of the World, Fight and Unite for a White South Africa!”²⁴ In response to this kind of racism, Trotsky’s letter to the South African revolutionaries offered a clear and unambiguous statement: “In any case, the worst crime on the part of the revolutionaries would be to give the smallest concessions to the privileges and prejudices of the whites. Whoever gives his little finger to the devil of chauvinism is lost.”²⁵

Granted the above, it should be clear that “Eastern Marxism” is not homogeneously Stalinist, let alone Dengist. Not only were there Trotskyist and other revolutionary currents in the East, but even among Marxist-Leninists there were major differences. For example, Che Guevara was fiercely opposed to markets and would likely have denounced Deng Xiaoping’s “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” along with its apologists such as Losurdo and Rockhill. In 1929, the Peruvian Marxist thinker José Carlos Mariátegui not only rejected Menshevik-like stageism for Peru, but also rejected any bogus “anti-imperialism” that was not based in class struggle and revolution. Any compromise with the national bourgeoisie and other class enemies was anathema to him:

For us, anti-imperialism does not and cannot constitute by itself a political program for a mass movement capable of conquering state power. Anti-imperialism, even if it could mobilize the nationalist bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie on the side of the worker and peasant masses (and we have already definitively denied this possibility), does not annul class antagonisms nor suppress different class interests.²⁶

Che and Mariátegui may fall under the banner of “Eastern Marxism,” but their views are distant from the nationalist and developmentalist apologetics found in latter-day neo-Stalinism. These examples show that “Eastern Marxism” is not the kind of caricature portrayed in Rockhill’s narrative.

24 Baruch Hirson, “The General Strike of 1922,” *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/supplem/hirson/1922.html>

25 It is worth noting that Albert Nzula, the Communist Party of South Africa’s first Black secretary general, was a sympathiser with Trotsky who was living in the USSR during the early 1930s. In 1934, he died under mysterious circumstances. For background on Nzula, see Paul Trewhela, “The Death of Albert Nzula and the Silence of George Padmore,” *Searchlight South Africa* Vol. 1, No. 1 (September 1988): 64-69. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/padmore/nzula-padmore.pdf>

26 José Carlos Mariátegui, “Anti-Imperialist Viewpoint,” *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mariategui/works/1929-ai.htm>

5 The Rockhill-Furr Bloc

Before turning to Rockhill's broader neo-Stalinist methodology, it is worth noting how readily he has endorsed some of the most lurid strands of conspiratorial thinking about Trotsky. This includes the tired, unproven, and wholly fraudulent claim of "collaboration" between Trotsky and the Nazis. While Rockhill is more sophisticated and polished than the average online Marxist-Leninist troll, it is very unfortunate (but predictable) that he accepts the unscrupulous allegations made against Trotsky by what might be called the Grand Inquisitor of contemporary Stalinism: the notorious medieval literature professor from Montclair – and recipient of the Stalin Society's "Man of the Year" award – Dr. Grover Furr.¹

At a Peking University conference in October 2025, it was reported that "Rockhill appreciated Furr's archival work and encouraged a more direct connection between historical analysis and contemporary political struggles".² But whatever "archival work" Furr does in Soviet history serves a clear apologetic function: exonerating Stalin, lionising him as a historical "giant", and whitewashing the political record of his crimes.

We are not in a position to question Furr's authority about matters of English Medieval literature. He has a doctorate in this field, and we give him the benefit of the doubt when it comes to judging Geoffery Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* or Arthurian romances. But Furr's Medievalism does not end in the fourteenth century, and he brings the worst aspects of Dark Age superstition to his treatment of Soviet history. In more than a dozen repetitive books on 1930s-era Stalinism, he has defended the Moscow Trial verdicts and incredulously claimed that Stalin committed absolutely "no crimes". Furr told an audience back in 2012: "I have yet to find one crime — yet to find one crime — that Stalin committed... I know they all say he killed 20, 30, 40 million people — it is bullshit".³ One does not need the inflated figures of Robert Conquest or Jordan Peterson to admit that Stalin's dictatorship was responsible for an immense loss of life.⁴

Furr is the go-to source, if not supreme historical authority, for Marxist-Leninists across the world who want to defend Stalin's legacy. He has also attracted the notice of fascists who are curious about Stalin, such as the white supremacist and Stalin-admirer, Nick Fuentes. But Furr is, to put it as fairly as possible, a completely unreliable guide on Soviet history. His work

1 "Peking University Held Professor Grover Furr's Lecture", *Peking University*, October 19, 2025. <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/6VtkADKBHi6RQVZy5kp63Q>

2 Ibid.

3 Grover Furr, "Communist Denier" Teaches Students", *Young Americans for Liberty*, November 7, 2012. YouTube video, 2:01. www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdajUraKoLM

4 On the problems with Robert Conquest's numbers and methodology, see Greene 2023, 68-72.

is saturated with conspiratorial reasoning and a catalogue of fallacies that would embarrass even a first-year student in an introductory logic course. He sincerely – and absurdly – believes that a vast “Trotskyite-Fascist” plot operated against the Soviet state. He accepts, virtually without qualification, all the coerced confessions of the Moscow Trial defendants, despite there being not a single shred of corroborating evidence. Indeed, he perversely argues that the lack of physical evidence is the best proof that this conspiracy existed! In Furr’s twisted logic, Trotsky and his co-conspirators were so clever and devious that they eliminated any real paper trail to connect them to their crimes.

Ironically, for a self-proclaimed Marxist, this is the same kind of reasoning Furr shares with the neoconservative Donald Rumsfeld. The former US Secretary of Defense justified the March 2003 invasion of Iraq with a similar sophism regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). As he infamously put it, “the absence of evidence [for WMDs] is not the evidence of absence”.⁵ In one of the more egregious examples of pseudo-dialectics in recent memory, Rumsfeld tried to derive a positive conclusion from a wholly negative premise. Likewise, Furr’s “materialist” method attempts to do the impossible: to prove the guilt of Trotsky not only with bloodstained confessions, rumours, and gossip, but with absolutely no evidence at all.⁶

Rockhill concurs with Furr when he doubts the validity of the 1937 Dewey Commission, which reviewed the claims of the Moscow Trials and found Trotsky not guilty. As a red herring, Rockhill notes that the head of the commission, John Dewey, was an anti-communist and later a Cold Warrior. While one can certainly disagree with Dewey’s politics and philosophy, there is no serious reason to doubt he performed his role conscientiously as chairman of the Commission. Trotsky was aware of Dewey’s anti-communism but still wanted a neutral intellectual authority to preside over the event. During the proceedings, Dewey sharply pressed Trotsky about whether Bolshevism logically culminated in Stalinism.⁷ While the Commission exonerated Trotsky, Dewey remained a political and philosophical opponent of both Trotsky and Bolshevism. In the following year, the two engaged in a fierce polemical exchange over Marxism and morality.⁸ Thus, any claim that the Dewey Commission was set-up to merely “whitewash” Trotsky is untenable. Had Trotsky merely sought a form of celebrity justice he would not have invited Dewey to chair the Commission. Instead, he could have simply held a press conference to deny Stalin and Vyshinsky’s charges.

5 Roger Cohen, “Rumsfeld Is Correct – the Truth Will Get Out”, *The New York Times*, June 7, 2006. <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/ihl/2006/06/07/world/IHT-07globalist.html>

6 For those interested in the deeper problems with Furr’s Stalinist conspiracism, see the two chapters in Greene 2025.

7 Leon Trotsky, *The Case of Leon Trotsky: Trotsky’s Testimony before the 1937 Dewey Commission investigating charges made against him in the Moscow Trials* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2007), 432-33 and 516-17.

8 Leon Trotsky, “Their Morals and Ours”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/morals/morals.htm> and John Dewey, “On Their Morals and Ours”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/comments/deweyoi.htm>; See also Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky 1929 – 1940* (New York: Verso, 2003), 352-58.

Rockhill has also recommended a 2018 Italian-language volume titled *Pyatakov's Flight: The Tactical Collaboration between Trotsky and the Nazis*. Its cover, which features a swastika draped over Trotsky's face, clearly signals its intent. The book claims that the former Left Oppositionist Georgy Pyatakov in December 1935 flew to Norway to conspire with Trotsky, allegedly to plan terrorist actions against the Soviet Union. Furr repeats these charges in his book *Trotsky's Amalgams* from 2015. There is, however, no evidence that such a meeting ever took place. No foreign flights landed in Norway during the period in question, and Trotsky was under close surveillance by Norwegian authorities, effectively confined to house arrest for much of his exile there. He was not even permitted to publicly defend himself against the Moscow Trial charges or to publish his writings. As Trotsky wryly observed, the only productive activity left to him was to read Hegel: "Had I at least known that all literary work was forbidden me, including all work of self-defense, I would have, for the moment, laid down my arms and read Hegel – there he sat, right on the shelf".⁹

The falsehood of Trotsky's clandestine meeting to foment fascist terrorism was exposed almost immediately after the Soviet prosecutors spread it. That Rockhill recommends works recycling the worst Stalinist slanders from Grover Furr and company is quite telling. It is equivalent to citing fundamentalist creationists like Ken Ham in a debate on Darwinian evolution and the age of the earth. At this point, we are no longer dealing with political criticisms of Trotskyism anymore. To criminalise Trotsky as a Nazi agent – the gravest accusation imaginable – is to dispense altogether with the political obligation to refute his positions. One need only denounce him as a twentieth-century Judas Iscariot, a monstrous Svengali, fit only for eradication. If Trotsky is cast as an absolute evil, then the struggle against him and his supporters ceases to be a matter of reasoned debate and devolves into witch-hunting—a Manichaeian politics of Stalinist angels versus "Trotskyite" demons.

9 Leon Trotsky, "Leon Trotsky in Norway", *Marxists Internet Archive*.
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/12/nor.htm>

The Dewey Commission concluded the following about Pyatakov's alleged meeting with Trotsky: "We hold that the evidence concerning Pyatakov's alleged flight in the record of the trial is open to the gravest doubt; that the Prosecutor's silence, and that of the Court, in the face of published testimony impugning that evidence during the trial, warrants a suspicion of frame-up; that the doubt which the record inspires is converted by the evidence offered in rebuttal into certainty that no such flight took place. We therefore find that Pyatakov did not see Trotsky in December, 1935, and did not receive from him instructions of any kind; and that the disproof of Pyatakov's testimony on this crucial point renders his whole confession worthless". Leon Trotsky, *Not Guilty: Findings of the 1937 Dewey Commission Chaired by John Dewey Investigating the Charges Against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials* (New York: Pathfinder, 2008), 247.

See also Grover Furr, *Trotsky's Amalgams. Trotsky's Lies, The Moscow Trials as Evidence, The Dewey Commission. Trotsky's Conspiracies of the 1930s, Volume One* (Kettering, Ohio: Erythros Press and Media, LLC, 2015), 432-34 and 469-75.

6 The Primacy of Stalinist Pragmatism

Rockhill's *Pipers* is not simply about the Frankfurt School or how they were in the pockets of Western imperialism. Were it merely a sordid tale about Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and their sundry evildoings, the book would be scarcely a third of its size. In introducing his subject matter, Rockhill spends an inordinate amount of time outlining his conceptual-historical "method", which he dubs "the primacy of practice".

To the uninitiated, this phrase may sound rather Marxist, even orthodox, and Rockhill declares that "DHM [Dialectical and Historical Materialism] is firmly grounded in the primacy of practice".¹ It is true he sometimes couples these statements about practice with nods to things that exist independently of human will, such as "objective reality", "materialist ontology", and the "dialectics of nature". But the origin of this particular slogan, "the primacy of practice", is not readily found in the writings of Marx, Engels, or Lenin. Rather, it appears frequently as a shibboleth in the writings and speeches of Stalinists and Maoists. Its true historical provenance lies in the repressive Soviet context of the 1930s, where an overemphasis on practice contributed to the violent dismantling of serious Marxist philosophy and science. In condemning an entire generation of thinkers, the Stalinist bureaucracy elevated its own crude administrative "commonsense" over any theory that seemed insufficiently subordinated to the Party's will.

Stalin and his ideological hatchet-men, Mark Mitin and Pavel Yudin, had no patience for philosophers that took their discipline seriously. More than denouncing opportunism – which Stalin engaged in freely and shamelessly – their real target was theoretical "dogmatism", i.e., adherence to a theory that was not reducible to the whim of the Central Committee. The last major obstacle to Stalin's consolidation of power in the intellectual field was Abram Deborin. A major Soviet philosopher in the 1920s, Deborin was head of the Academy of Sciences and the chief editor of the premier theoretical journal, *Under the Banner of Marxism*. For Deborin, dialectics was an objective and genuine science of nature and history. Reality was material, structured by dialectical laws; nothing stood outside this totality. Marxist philosophy served to grasp and articulate the order and connections of real things. Against Stalinist stereotypes, Deborin did not have an a priori contempt for experiment or action but aimed to elaborate philosophical concepts capable of grounding revolutionary practice. To paraphrase Lenin, without revolutionary philosophy, there could be no revolutionary movement. For Deborin's Hegelian-Marxism, authentic practice begins with rational insight into necessity.

¹ Rockhill 2025, 337.

Without deeper reflection on what Marx termed “practical-critical” activity in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, practice risks degenerating into pragmatism. If Marxists wished to avoid sliding into pragmatism, positivism, or empiricism, Deborin maintained that dialectical materialism must be affirmed as a universal method and ontology. Marxist philosophy could not be reduced to the sum of political slogans; for the sake of maintaining its dialectical side, this meant serious engagement with Hegel’s *Logic*. When Lenin, in 1922, urged *Under the Banner of Marxism* to become “a kind of ‘Society of Materialist Friends of Hegelian Dialectics’” Deborin took that to heart.² To be a Marxist friend of the Hegelian dialectic meant that the categories of the finite and infinite, the abstract and the concrete, essence and existence, and freedom and necessity could not be interpreted through the narrow lens of political expediency. Such concepts demanded to be carefully worked through, as part of a comprehensive science of thinking, rather than being brushed aside with opportunistic impatience.

In 1931-32, Deborin was condemned for reducing Marxism to abstract metaphysics, and for turning Marxism into another variety of Hegelianism or Spinozism. It did not matter if Plekhanov, the founder of Russian Social Democracy, called Marxism a variety of Spinozism. Grounding Marx in the legacy of classical rationalism was recast by Stalin and his philosophical henchmen as “Menshevizing Idealism” or, worse, “Trotskyism”. Philosophical reason had to be limited to make room for the will of the Party.³ Of course, Stalin retained the terminology of dialectical materialism, but emptied it of substance. In this way, he could be Marxist in form, but subjectivist in practice.

Thus, in order to give the Central Committee and the General Secretary more elbowroom for “practical” manoeuvring, Deborin’s philosophy had to be condemned and purged as “Trotskyist”. It did not matter if Deborin was not a Trotskyist, had paid lip-service to the “primacy of practice”, and even accepted the Stalinist line on Socialism in One Country. He was still condemned as a Left Oppositionist at the level of theory. Hegel himself was suspected of “Trotskyite” deviations. Stalin denounced the Deborinists in 1930 at the Institute of Red Professors: “Everything written by the Deborin group has to be smashed... The Deborinites regard Hegel as an icon”.⁴

What was the result of this purge of “excessive” Hegelianism? Under Stalin, dialectics turned from a legitimate science of thinking to a pseudo-science of legitimation. The words “dialectical” and “concrete” functioned as rhetorical gestures, slogans, and ad hoc justifications

2 V.I. Lenin, “On the Significance of Militant Materialism”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/mar/12.htm>

3 On this repression of Deborinists, Mechanists, and other Marxist philosophers in the Soviet Union, see Yehoshua Yakhot, *The Suppression of Philosophy in the USSR (The 1920s & 1930s)* (Oak Park: Mehring Books, 2012) and Helena Sheehan, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1985), 151-244. While Abram Deborin never rose to the level of a Stalinist inquisitor – and was ultimately one of its victims – he could be heavy-handed in his treatment of philosophical opponents in the Mechanist camp. Nevertheless, heated polemics are not equivalent to purges, bans, or forced recantations.

4 Dmitri Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 231-32.

for whatever policy Stalin and his cronies announced *ex cathedra*. Anyone who dissented from this new orthodoxy of the “primacy of practice” faced real physical danger. If thinking the wrong way about Aristotle in the Middle Ages could get you excommunicated (if not burned at the stake), then thinking the wrong way about Hegel in Stalin’s Russia could get you imprisoned (if not shot by the NKVD).⁵

Trotsky was not only politically prescient regarding the consequences of Socialism in One Country, and how it meant the eventual destruction of the USSR. He was also the first critic of Stalin’s “primacy of practice” thesis, which Trotsky attacked in his 1928 piece “Philosophical Trends of Bureaucratism”. He first identified the degeneration of theory in Stalin’s short book, *The Foundations of Leninism* (1924) and detected in Stalin’s exegesis of Marx, Engels, and Lenin a medieval cast of mind. This Stalinist hermeneutics meant ripping quotes out of context and using the bowdlerised text like sacred scripture: “One must go back to the Middle Ages to find analogous examples of the rise of an entire new ideological system on the basis of a few lines of text which have been misinterpreted or incorrectly copied. Thus the Old Believers let themselves be burned alive for the sake of some miscopied lines from the Bible”.⁶

Trotsky catalogued instances of Stalin’s narrow empiricism, which prioritised the immediate needs of institutions and cliques above the historic mission of the revolutionary movement. This routinisation of Marxism was not unique to Stalin; it had antecedents in Karl Kautsky’s Second International. Kautsky, despite his reputation as the official “Pope of Marxism”, emptied socialism of its dialectical content, ultimately reconciling with the right-wing of German Social Democracy in World War I.⁷ Trotsky likewise noted that Stalin, operating at an even lower theoretical register than Kautsky, further reduced Marxism to tactical machinations. Yet Marxism is an all-encompassing theory, and theory imposes demands on immediate practice from a higher vantage point. As Trotsky wrote:

He [Stalin] absolutely fails to understand that theory-genuine theory or theory on a large scale-does not at all take shape in direct connection with the practical tasks of the day. Rather it is the consolidation and generalisation of all human practical activity and experience, embracing different historical periods in their materially determined sequence. It is only because theory is not inseparably linked with the practical tasks contemporary to it, but rises above them, that it has the gift of seeing ahead, that is, is able to prepare to link itself with future practical activity and to train people who

5 During the 1930s, many Soviet Hegelians were shot, while Deborin slept on a bench to avoid the NKVD: “In 1937, four years after the events just described, when the mass arrests had begun, Deborin at one time was afraid to spend the night at home. He slept on a bench in the Neskuchny Garden in Moscow. However, the cup passed him by. He was one of the few “Deborinists” who survived”. See Yakhot 2012, 89.

6 Leon Trotsky, “Philosophical Tendencies of the Bureaucracy”, in *The Challenge of the Left Opposition* (1928-29) (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1981), 507-08.

7 On the problems with Kautsky’s philosophy, see Douglas Greene, *The New Reformism and the Revival of Karl Kautsky: The Renegade’s Revenge* (New York: Routledge Books, 2024), 21-30.

will be equal to future practical tasks. The theory of Marx raised itself like a giant watchtower above the revolutionary practical work of the Lassalleans contemporary to Marx, just as it did above the practical activity of all the organisations of the First International.⁸

The critique of pragmatism runs consistently through Trotsky's writings on Stalin. To describe Stalin as a genuine dialectical materialist was truly risible, since to "a bureaucrat, theory is the formula of administration".⁹ Whereas "Marxist theory is the weapon of thought serving to clarify what has been, what is becoming and what lies ahead, and for the determination of what is to be done...Stalin's theory is the servant of the bureaucracy. It serves to justify zig-zags after the event, to conceal yesterday's mistakes and consequently to prepare tomorrow's".¹⁰ In other words, this was a "philosophy" suited to Thermidorians and Bonapartists – a pragmatism that Trotsky regarded as "the mortal enemy of Bolshevism".¹¹

8 Trotsky 1981, 511.

9 Leon Trotsky, "Stalin as a Theoretician", *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/03/stalin.htm>

10 Ibid.

11 Leon Trotsky, "We Cannot Follow a Short-Range Policy", in Trotsky 1981, 93.

7 Mao's Negative Dialectics

Rockhill claims that Mao's *On Practice* is necessary for the theoretical rejuvenation of Marxism and strategic thinking.¹ Nonetheless, Mao's philosophy shares many of the same problems found in the Stalinist "primacy of practice". It is no coincidence that, during Mao's struggle for political hegemony within the CPC, his main philosophical whipping boy was Abram Deborin. This might seem strange, given Deborin's obscurity in the history of philosophy, and even within Marxism. However, Mao's philosophical pamphlets, namely those *On Practice* (July 1937) and *On Contradiction* (August 1937), were directly shaped by the triumph of Stalinist ideology in the 1930s. The position Mao advances in these works was anticipated in the "theoretical struggle" led by Mitin and Yudin; their ideological opponents in the Mechanists and the Deborinites would become Mao's as well.

Mao's critique of Deborinism also comes with an added twist; Deborin isn't just a signifier for theoretical dogmatism, or Trotskyism, but he also commits the sin of resolving contradictions and antagonisms in a "rightist" fashion. This makes Deborin not just a "Trotskyite", but a Right-Oppositionist Bukharinite, since Deborin's lack of emphasis on antagonism means the possibility of class reconciliation under socialism.² But labelling Deborinism right-wing did not prevent Mao from later saying the complete opposite: that Deborinism represented sectarian Trotskyism in theory. Deborin thus becomes an empty signifier for everything philosophically suspect in Communist Party – i.e., "two-line" – struggles. If Stalin made political amalgams in show trials that read like Mad Libs – lumping together disparate groups like "Trotskyites", "Bukharinites", and fascists – Mao, in a philosophical register, did likewise, grouping "Deborinism" with the political enemy of the month (or year).

According to Mao, Deborin's monism blinded him to the fundamental character of contradiction. Contradictions are so radically constitutive of reality that resolving them is illusory. Since they do not just appear at a specific level of development, they are always and already present, at every level of being. This means that there can be no "negation of the negation" as a dialectical law, and here Mao follows Stalin. In *The Short Course* chapter on "Dialectical and Historical Materialism" (which has been speculated as ghostwritten by Mitin) Stalin omits the "negation of the negation".³ But Mao goes further than mere omission and explicitly

1 See 24:50 in Critical Theory Workshop. "Toronto Book Launch for 'Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism?'" *YouTube*. February 10, 2026. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdshmadDbq0>.

2 *Three Major Struggles on China's Philosophical Front (1949-64)* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1973), 63-4. [url](#)

3 On this speculation, see Antin Donoso, "Stalinism in Marxist Philosophy", *Studies in Soviet Thought* Vol. 19, No. 2 (Mar., 1979): 138.

repudiates the law in “Talk on Questions of Philosophy” in 1964, delivered on the eve of the Cultural Revolution.⁴

For Mao, contradiction – or as he often puts it, “unevenness” – is primary, while the whole or unity is secondary and transient within an ongoing process of flux. Equilibrium does not exist in nature or politics:

In any contradiction the development of the contradictory aspects is uneven. Sometimes they seem to be in equilibrium, which is however only temporary and relative, while unevenness is basic. Of the two contradictory aspects, one must be principal and the other secondary.⁵

We see in Mao’s writings and speeches how contradiction is exacerbated to the point that existence itself appears dualised. More real than any thesis or synthesis is *antithesis*. Perpetual struggle, rather than rational totality, becomes real. A Deborinite monism – i.e., a Marxist Spinozism – is rejected as dulling antagonism and anaesthetising the political will, and Mao’s Heraclitean sense of negativity and constant struggle starts to resemble Nietzsche’s will to power more than Hegel’s *Logic*. Synthesis ceases to mean the reconciliation of parts into a more reasonable whole but only the hardheaded victory of one force over another. Mao can even sound like a Stalinised version of the ancient Sophist Thrasymachus, who notoriously argued that “might makes right”:

What is synthesis? You have all witnessed how the two opposites, the Kuomintang and the Communist Party, were synthesised on the mainland. The synthesis took place like this: their armies came, and we devoured them, we ate them bite by bite...One thing eating another, big fish eating little fish, this is synthesis. It has never been put like this in books. I have never put it this way in my books either. For his part, Yang Hsien-chen believes that two combine into one, and that synthesis is the indissoluble tie between two opposites. What indissoluble ties are there in this world? Things may be tied, but in the end they must be severed. There is nothing which cannot be severed.⁶

Here, Mao is letting the nihilist cat out of the pseudo-Marxist bag. Dialectics is not about a rational progression and, instead, becomes a contest of perspectives. It is a war of the worlds (three worlds), or a war between “bourgeois” humanity and “proletarian” humanity. That the latter kind of humanity might, for strategic purposes, include the comprador bourgeoisie and Richard Nixon as allies is not a primary concern. Mao’s emphasis on negation as perpetual struggle is not so much a conceptual advance over Stalin; nor is it, as Althusser argued, a

4 Mao Zedong, “Talk on Questions of Philosophy”, *Marxists Internet Archive*.

5 Mao Zedong, “On Contradiction”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_17.htm

6 Mao Zedong, “Talks on Questions of Philosophy”.

“leftwing criticism of Stalinism”.⁷ It is, rather, an intensification of the same opportunism. Instead of grounding struggle in a broader theoretical conception, how one struggles is arbitrarily determined by the party bureaucrat.

Thus, at the height of the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (GPCR), Mao could promote the slogan “one divides into two” against right-wing opportunism. Yet, when the moment came to smash the Shanghai Commune and reconcile with the West, he could just as readily invoke “non-antagonistic” contradictions. Party members who criticised Mao for political excesses in the GPCR could be denounced as Deborinite-Bukharinists for minimising antagonism. And those who objected to opening toward the West could be dismissed as dogmatic and “sectarian” Deborinite-Trotskyists. In Mao’s hands, there is a sophistical dialectic for all seasons, one in which error is never acknowledged but, instead, constantly projected back onto the enemy. As with Stalin, accusations of opportunism or sectarianism against Marxist critics function as veiled confessions of the counterrevolutionary bureaucrat who levels them.

On another level, Mao promoted his own “negative dialectics” of permanent revolt with no hope of resolution. The Soviet philosopher Eduard Batalov observed how Mao’s philosophy bore certain parallels with the thinking of Adorno. For Batalov, it is rather striking that negative dialectics can vacillate between the extremes of hyperbolic militancy and quietism, with the same theory serving the nonconformist rebel, the conservative academic, and – though Batalov stops short of stating this – the Stalinist bureaucrat:

Adorno endeavours to persuade the individual to adopt a non-conformist approach to the world around him, a critical attitude to that world as something “inferior”. Yet the “negative dialectician” gives the individual no firm basis for such criticism and when advocating the other extreme he transforms the non-conformist into the rebel, for whom the means becomes an end in itself. In his philosophy which is directed towards an end (as something definitive, polar) Adorno comes forward as both nihilist and apocalyptic. Yet apocalyptic revolt is a revolt that knows no moderation, no limits, which sweeps aside everything in its path, and is of course very far removed from social revolution. Confirmation of this can be found in a conception, whose author admittedly has nothing in common with the Frankfurt school and never declared himself an advocate of “negative dialectics”, but who nevertheless evolved ideas very close to “negative dialectics” in spirit, namely Maoist teaching with regard to contradictions which expresses the same spirit of nihilism as that which permeates Adorno’s “negative dialectics”. Naturally it would be wrong to regard Mao Tse-tung as the ideologist of militant youth in the West, yet nevertheless in his statements just as in the works of Marcuse, Adorno, etc., we find philosophical justification of revolt.⁸

7 Louis Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism* (London: New Left Books, 1976), 92.

8 Eduard Batalov, *The Philosophy of Revolt: Criticism of Left Radical Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 91. A similar comparison of Mao and Adorno’s dialectics is made by Slavoj Žižek: “Mao scathingly

To understand Mao's philosophical manoeuvring more fully, it is worth quoting him directly from *On Practice*. We do not start with knowledge for Mao, but rather discover

... the truth through practice, and again through practice verify and develop the truth. Start from perceptual knowledge and actively develop it into rational knowledge; then start from rational knowledge and actively guide revolutionary practice to change both the subjective and the objective world. Practice, knowledge, again practice, and again knowledge. This form repeats itself in endless cycles, and with each cycle the content of practice and knowledge rises to a higher level. Such is the whole of the dialectical-materialist theory of knowledge, and such is the dialectical-materialist theory of the unity of knowing and doing.⁹

Despite the assertion that knowing and doing are one, there is a fundamental instability at the heart of Mao's theory. Perceptual experience is said to ground theory, but theory likewise needs to be grounded in perception (or practice). The result is a kind of epistemological seesaw that constantly oscillates between practice and theory without resolution. While this reciprocal back and forth is often called "dialectical", one may recall Hegel's *Logic*, and its discussion of "ground".¹⁰ There, Hegel argues that such reciprocal flipflopping between concept and reality (between reason and its object) is not genuinely rational, but the flux of the "understanding". Such circular reasoning and dualism cannot be called knowledge, but it may be called "begging the question". Hence, instead of answering the question of what knowledge is, Mao lumps together a mosaic of disparate concepts and things, presenting their interplay as a theoretical advance. When Mao, in a rhetorical flourish, labels this perpetual back and forth "a unity", it is somewhat like resolving the chicken-and-egg problem of what came first by coining the hybrid term "chegg".

Beyond its circularity, Mao's epistemology resembles a Stalinised version of John Dewey's own trial and error pragmatism.¹¹ Like any flavour of pragmatism, it struggles to account for the transition from experience to knowledge. A conception of knowledge that claims objectivity – purporting to reflect a lawful material world – is illicit if it can appeal only to

dismisses the category of "dialectical synthesis" of the opposites, promoting his own version of "negative dialectics" – every synthesis is for him ultimately what Adorno in his critique of Lukacs called *erpresste Versoehnung* – enforced reconciliation – at best a momentary pause in the ongoing struggle, which occurs not when the opposites are united, but when one side simply wins over the other".

Slavoj Žižek, "Mao Zedong: the Marxist Lord of Misrule", in Mao Zedong, *On Practice and Contradiction* (New York: Verso, 2007), 11.

9 Mao Zedong, "On Practice", *Marxists Internet Archive*. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_16.htm

10 For the circularity of the category of ground in Hegel – and why it ends in tautological statements of grounds grounding (or positing) other grounds in infinite regresses – see the discussion of Ground in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "Science of Logic", *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hl/hl456.htm>

11 For Dewey's influence on the young Mao, see Emmanuel Renault, "Dewey, Hook et Mao: Quelques affinités entre marxisme et pragmatisme," *Actuel Marx* Vol. 54, No. 2 (2013): 138-57.

sense-perception or “practice”. As David Hume and Immanuel Kant argued long ago, along with the “good bishop” George Berkeley, sensation alone discloses nothing about an objective world that exists independently of consciousness. Nor can it yield principles, such as the principle of sufficient reason, or universal concepts like time and space, or freedom and necessity. Such concepts are not things one can taste or smell, or “struggle” towards. Thus, the foundation of Mao’s theory of knowledge is thoroughly empiricist, and the transition from particular perceptions (or practices) to universal concepts in his version of Marxism is little better than alchemy.

Mao was not without his Chinese Trotskyist critics on these philosophical questions. Wang Fanxi, writing in exile, argued that Mao severely misunderstood the nature of knowledge and its accumulation. As Wang put it, Mao’s approach amounted to a form of “mechanical induction”. Against Mao’s empiricism and circular dialectics, Wang maintained that Marxist epistemology begins not with isolated perception but with the inherited body of scientific and theoretical knowledge acquired by our scientific forebearers and contemporaries:

Human experience and knowledge accumulated over aeons is ceaselessly handed down. People’s understanding (as individuals or in groups) does not start from their own perception but by studying and digesting the rationality of their predecessors and contemporaries. Do today’s revolutionaries first become Luddites and then Fourierites and Owenites before finding their own way to Marxism? Of course not. Instead, they start with Marxism-Leninism, the highest form of knowledge. So socialists should found their practice in revolutionary theory, gained from past achievements, and thus get twice the result with half the effort, rather than waste time and energy on ‘perceptual’ revolutionary activity. For in today’s conditions, defeat is practically inevitable without a grounding in ‘rational’ revolutionary theory.¹²

Wang observed that Mao’s “primacy of practice” reflected his own political situation. As a military and party leader, Mao privileged tactics and immediate results above all, but at the expense of broader understanding and strategy. The result was a version of Marxism that allowed Mao to drift toward the national interests of the Stalinist bureaucracy. By over-privileging action (“struggle”) in his thinking, Mao ensured that practice does not ground itself in theory; instead, theory is fashioned ad hoc to justify whatever political practice prevails after the fact.

¹² Wang Fanxi, *Mao Zedong Thought* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), 177-78.

8 The Red Guard and the Market Stalinist

The zigzags of Mao's philosophy have inspired both "left" and right deviations. On the one hand stands the French thinker and unrepentant Maoist Alain Badiou. In his work, Badiou celebrates the division central to Mao's dialectics, proclaiming that "one divides into two" is the main law of revolution: "In concrete, militant philosophy, it is thus indispensable to announce that there is only one law of the dialectic: One divides into two. Such is the principle of observable facts and of action".¹ For Badiou, Mao is, above all, a rebel when it comes to established institutions – even avowedly socialist ones. He therefore defends Mao for "bombarding the headquarters" during the Cultural Revolution, while also deploring the Chairman's suppression of the Shanghai People's Commune in 1967. In a sense, Badiou is more Maoist than Mao, for he treats struggle itself as the only constant in the universe: "Struggle is the only absolute principle of dialectical thought: this is the essence of dialectics as a philosophy in revolt".²

Rockhill cites Badiou as his doctoral supervisor at Paris 8.³ While Rockhill appreciates some aspects of his former professor's militancy and polemical style, he criticises Badiou for utopianism and messianism. Rockhill argues in *Pipers* that Badiou's idea of communism is emptied of determinate content, functioning instead as an empty signifier severed from "Actually Existing Socialism". On this view, Badiou's communism is vague enough to be adopted by students and intellectuals as an intellectually fashionable posture, or as a theoretical "persona", with little practical significance. One can style oneself as "Badiouan", just as one might play at being a "Deleuzean" or "Adornian". Perhaps against Badiou's own intentions, "Badiouanism" becomes another commodity within what Rockhill calls "the imperial theoretical superstructure".

Rockhill credits Badiou for being a more systematic philosopher than Žižek. By contrast, Žižek is straightforwardly anathematised as "capitalism's court jester", or the epitome of everything wrong with Western Marxism. Žižek is an academic celebrity, who flirts with Marxian (and even Stalinist) labels, but maintains a fundamentally conformist politics. He can be counted on to endorse everything from Obama, NATO, Donald Trump, or Israel. But being a systematic philosopher like Badiou is not necessarily a virtue for Rockhill. Part of Žižek's problem, Rockhill suggests, is that he borrows too heavily from Badiou's idealistic

1 Alain Badiou, *The Theory of the Subject* (London: Continuum, 2009), 14.

2 Alain Badiou, *Théorie de la contradiction* (Maspéro, 1975), 19. <http://www.entretiens.asso.fr/Badiou/Theorie-de-la-contradiction.pdf> [Our translation] This section draws heavily from Doug Enaa Greene, "A Unity of Opposites: The Dengist and the Red Guard", *Monthly Review Online*, August 19, 2022. www.mronline.org/2022/08/19/a-unity-of-opposites-the-dengist-and-the-red-guard

3 Gabriel Rockhill, "Vita", *Gabriel Rockhill*. <https://gabrielrockhill.com/about/>

Platonism. Instead of communism being rooted in AES, Badiou turns it into a Platonic form, or a Kantian regulative idea. If Kant posited God in the *Critique of Practical Philosophy* to ground morality, then Badiou posits communism to ground the good life.

Badiou's Platonic affirmation of communism saves it from the bloody legacies of AES and the contamination of real history. For Rockhill, this pushes Badiou towards an otherworldly anarchism, where any compromise with state-building is cast as treason against the purity of the communist idea. He writes that Badiou's "anti-politics" resembles "... insurgent anarchism, merged with an unhealthy dose of metaphysics and utopian socialism. After all, this is a politics in which an individual becomes a Subject by being faithful to an inexplicable Event that interrupts history, acting on its consequences like the followers of Christ".⁴

So much for the antinomianism of Saint Badiou. But also echoing Badiou's work on St. Paul, Rockhill describes his own road to Damascus moment in *Pipers*, claiming to have finally seen the light from the East (or at least saw that the East was Red). He finally shifted his grad school allegiance from Western Marxism – or specifically the speculative leftism of the Paris 8 culture – to the People's Republic of China. Curiously, his Eastern Marxism is strongly mediated through the Western Marxist scholarship of Domenico Losurdo, whom Rockhill has helped to introduce to Anglophone readers.

Like Badiou, Losurdo defended Maoist China in the 1960s. Unlike Badiou, however, he did not recoil from China after the Cultural Revolution. Rather, Losurdo became a staunch defender of the "realism" of Deng Xiaoping's market socialism. Where Badiou celebrated the mass enthusiasm of the Cultural Revolution, Losurdo condemned it as a form of utopian messianism – at times even linking Mao to Trotsky in this regard. Instead, he championed the side of Mao who emphasised state building and the development of productive forces, viewing Deng as the true heir to this legacy. On this account, Losurdo holds that socialism is best exemplified by the orderly, bureaucratic, and market-driven policies of contemporary China. Socialism comes to mean not the withering away of the state or the abolition of money, but markets tinted red.⁵

For Badiou, dialectics is authentic when the one divides into two, or what he calls "scission".⁶ But Losurdo would stress the need for reconciliation, or what the Maoists would call "two combining into one". The Maoist legacy seems split between the purism of the GPCR Red

4 Gabriel Rockhill, "Capitalism's Court Jester: Slavoj Žižek", *Counterpunch*, January 2, 2023. <https://www.counterpunch.org/2023/01/02/capitalisms-court-jester-slavoj-zizek/>

5 For more on Losurdo and China, see Domenico Losurdo, "World War I, the October Revolution and Marxism's Reception in the West and East", in *Cataclysm 1914: The First World War and the Making of Modern World Politics*, ed. Alexander Anievas (Boston: Brill, 2015), 275; Domenico Losurdo, "History of the Communist Movement: Failure, Betrayal, or Learning Process?" *Nature, Society, and Thought* Vol. 16, Iss. 1 (Jan. 2003): 55; Domenico Losurdo, *Class Struggle: A Political and Philosophical History* (New York: Palgrave, 2016), 193 – 96; Domenico Losurdo, "Flight from History? The Communist Movement between Self-Criticism and Self-Contempt", *Nature, Society and Thought* Vol. 13, no. 3 (October 2000): 494 – 97.

6 Badiou 1975, 47.

Guard and the “capitalist roader” position of Deng. What Badiou condemns Mao for, Losurdo and Rockhill embrace, and vice versa. One can imagine a staged debate between Badiou and Losurdo, hurling epithets at one another borrowed from the heyday of 1960s factional struggle sessions.

But which theorist is the truer heir to Mao? Such a question cannot be answered simply, since the Chairman himself embodied both tendencies. This duality reflects not any principled Marxism, but Mao’s own tactical opportunism and pragmatism. Any emphasis on struggle as opposed to harmony could be readjusted to suit bureaucratic needs. When Raya Dunayevskaya, in a kind of Orientalism, attacks Mao in 1957 as “permeated to the marrow of his bones ... with Confucianism” she did not foresee Mao’s anti-Confucius campaigns during the GPCR.⁷ Mao is not “permeated to the marrow of his bones” with *The Analects*, but with Stalinism and the “primacy of practice”.

If Badiou overlays Maoism with Gallic existentialism and Platonism, then Losurdo obscures Mao and Deng with Hegelian jargon. To paraphrase Marx, Badiou “idealises” the bureaucratic manipulation of Mao during the GPCR as heroic, while Losurdo “empiricises” the actual, reconciling Marxism to bureaucratic realism. In this sense, Badiou represents the poetry of Maoism and Losurdo represents its prose.

The poetic Maoism of Badiou rejects parties, states, and the actual process of history. Revolution does not arise from mundane material processes but erupts like a bolt from the blue. We wait patiently, with militant faith, for the coming of the Event. But, most of the time, we resemble Benjamin’s Angel of History, bearing witness in horror to the wreckage of the past piling up before us – one disaster after another. Nevertheless, if we steel ourselves and maintain fidelity to the Event, perhaps it will arrive like a state of grace. With Badiou’s ontology of the Event, it becomes difficult to distinguish his idea of revolution from the Christian Rapture.

Losurdo rejects Badiou’s antinomianism in favour of being more worldly-wise. In this respect, Losurdo follows Lukács, who made his own Faustian bargain with the Stalinist state, with all its betrayals and bloodshed. In his 1934 essay on Hölderlin, Lukács obliquely justified his turn towards Stalin by invoking Hegel’s notion of accepting the “prose of the present”.⁸ If the French Revolution had to pass through the prosaic development of Thermidor in order to consolidate bourgeois power against feudalism, then socialism—likewise—must also endure a Thermidorian phase.

Trotsky, in *Revolution Betrayed*, sharply criticised such analogies. For socialism to work, he argued it must be international and democratic. One cannot hope to develop the productive

7 Raya Dunayevskaya, “The ‘Philosophy’ of the Yenan Period: Mao Perverts Lenin”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/dunayevskaya/works/articles/raya.htm>

8 Georg Lukács, “Hölderlin’s Hyperion”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/1934/holderlin.htm>

forces in isolation from the world economy – no person is an island unto themselves, and no country exists outside the international system. In a speech to the Fifteenth Congress of the RCP, Trotsky compared ignoring international conditions to walking naked through the streets of Moscow in January, absurdly imagining one could avoid both the weather and the police.⁹ As for democracy, it is as vital to socialism as oxygen is to the body. Without it, bureaucratic mismanagement would flourish and a chasm would emerge between privileged managers and workers, all setting the stage for capitalist restoration. Against Lukács, what proved effective for the national bourgeoisie of the French Revolution cannot simply be applied in the same way to a Marxist project.

Losurdo inherits this same Lukácsian error. Instead of applying Lukács' own critique of irrationalism to Stalin, he attempts to Hegelianise the bureaucracy, presenting it as something rational and real. And while Losurdo's scholarship offers many valuable insights into philosophy and history, his own dialectical reason stops short when it comes to Stalin's Russia and Deng's China. Like so many Marxist philosophers before him, such as Lukács and Bukharin, Losurdo limits dialectics to accommodate pragmatic *Realpolitik*. The vestiges of bureaucracy, the state, markets, and money are not inherently rational institutions. As Marx and Lenin insisted, they deserve to perish when the productive forces develop in harmony with genuinely free social relations.¹⁰

Rockhill does not have much to say about Losurdo's Hegelian Marxism. Instead, he adopts the weakest aspects of Losurdo's Stalinism and even goes further in indulging in conspiracy theories. When Losurdo corresponded with Furr, he supported socialism in one country, and the need to affirm Stalin's "realism" against Trotsky. Yet Losurdo at least conceded that the purges were tragic, describing them in terms of a "dialectic of Saturn."¹¹ Indeed, in his discussion of the inner-Bolshevik "civil war", the situation under Stalin comes to resemble something akin to Mafia-style gangland killings.¹² Moreover, Losurdo did not go so far as to accept the confessions of the Moscow Trial defendants as true. And last – but not least – it is difficult to overlook that when Losurdo discusses Bonapartism in bourgeois states, he admits that certain aspects of Stalin's and Mao's rule could be considered Bonapartist.¹³ As far as one can tell, Rockhill shows little of this dialectical or historical nuance. If he did, he might be guilty of "Trotskyite" tendencies in admitting the Bonapartist character of "AES".

9 "Speech to the Fifteenth Conference", in Trotsky 1980, 200-1.

10 On this, see chapter five of Lenin's *State and Revolution* on the economic basis for the withering away of the state. V. I. Lenin, "The Economic Basis for the Withering Away of the State," *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/cho5.htm>

11 For a thorough criticism of Losurdo's Stalinism see Greene 2023, 285-310 and Greene 2025, 26-49.

12 Losurdo 2023, 39-40. This point was first made by Alex de Jong.

13 See Losurdo 2024b, 187-91.

9 “Socialism From Above”: The Frankfurt School

Opportunism in politics has theoretical roots. If Kant famously limited reason to make room for faith, a similar operation can be found in both Soviet Marxism and Western Marxism. The critique of “dogmatism” in Marxism-Leninism, or the critique of “closed” or “identity-thinking” in Adorno might seem superficially open, pluralistic, and non-reductive; after all, “dogma” is grey but real life is green. But such appearances can be misleading. The limitations of theory stem from a shared pessimism about the self-emancipation of the working class, and what passes for a “dialectical” philosophy often results in a fairly mechanistic and fatalistic politics. It does not matter if the source is Adorno or Stalin: both the original Frankfurt School and the advocates of “AES” arrive at similar conclusions, insofar as A) they do not take the arguments of classical Marxism seriously and B) they look to outside agents to carry on the struggle for liberation. Despite their many differences, the Frankfurt School theorists and Stalinists tend to promote what Hal Draper called “socialism from above”, rather than socialism from below.¹

To Marcuse’s credit, he rejected Stalinism and was not content to languish in the Grand Hotel Abyss with Adorno and Horkheimer. He continued to look for historical forces and social groups that might carry forward progressive struggles – national liberation movements, feminism, environmentalism, and alternatives to bureaucratic socialism. Marcuse was rightly appalled by Adorno’s attitude toward the student movement, and he openly criticised him for calling the police in 1969 on anti-Vietnam War protestors occupying Frankfurt University. In his correspondence, Marcuse told his old colleague: “I would despair about myself (us) if I (we) would appear to be on the side of a world that supports mass murder in Vietnam, or says nothing about it, and which makes a hell of any realms that are outside the reach of its own repressive power”.²

Marcuse should not have been surprised by Adorno’s attitude. The latter’s politics had long followed a conservative trajectory. Apart from the occasionally positive reference to Lenin, he (critically) supported the pro-NATO and pro-Western SPD. True, Adorno yearned to write an orthodox-style critique of the 1959 Godesberg Programme, in which the SPD formally abandoned Marxism.³ However, after consulting Horkheimer, Adorno thought it better to keep quiet. Just as he had insisted in the 1930s on keeping silent about the Soviet Union and

1 On the distinction between socialism from “below” and “above”, see Hal Draper, “The Two Souls of Socialism”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1966/twosouls/>

2 Quoted in Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School* (New York: Verso, 2016), 346.

3 Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850 – 2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 317.

the Moscow Trials to preserve the anti-fascist popular front, he now made a similar argument about maintaining support for the SPD:

If anyone attacks the SPD today – and that is what it would amount to, however one formulated one’s comments – that would be grist to the mill of everyone who wants to shake the already frail pillars of democracy...I would not wish to contribute to the same sort of disaster that people brought about in an earlier age when they coined the slogan of social fascism.⁴

While Adorno acknowledged the political dangers of the SPD joining the mainline conservatives in the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) – which would go on to form the “Grand Coalition” – he regarded such a fusion as a progressive step insofar as it helped keep the neo-fascists of the NPD [National Democratic Party] at bay:

On the other hand, I regard the Grand Coalition as a real opportunity for a transition to a two-party system of the kind that you [Horkheimer] envisage, and this in turn would lead to the elimination of the NPD which despite all reassurances I take as seriously as you.⁵

Thus, Adorno was clear that any alternative to the SPD was illusionary, sectarian, and nihilistic in outlook. Anti-capitalist movements that went beyond the Bundestag were condemned in advance as reactionary. In this way we come full circle with Adorno: a thinker who prided himself as transcending party-politics and mass conformism ultimately returned to supporting the SPD and the bourgeois status quo as authentically “Marxist”.

Despite condemning the student movement for allegedly precipitating fascist dangers, the West German government that Adorno supported was itself riddled with former Nazis and had even banned the Communist Party in 1956.⁶ As Rockhill shows, some of the freshly minted Frankfurt School members of the Federal Republic period also had Nazi pasts. When Adorno was asked about Ludwig von Friedeburg’s earlier involvement in the Third Reich, he remarked that the positive qualities instilled in him during his service in the Wehrmacht – such as a sense of “duty” and a “collective sense of responsibility” – had ultimately “allowed him full emancipation”.⁷

Contrast the authoritarian qualities Adorno admired in these “ex-Nazis” with the traits he

4 Quoted in Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 419.

5 Quoted in *ibid.*

6 William D. Graf, “Anti-Communism in the Federal Republic of Germany”, *Socialist Register* 21 (1984): 167. Future Red Army Faction leader Ulrike Meinhoff described the presence of “former” Nazis in the Federal Republic of Germany as follows: “Anyone who speaks of ‘old Nazis’, however, should also take the next step, which is to recognise and criticise the equally old political ideas that still hold sway”. Ulrike Meinhof, “Hitler Within You”, in *Everyone Talks about the Weather ... We Don’t*, ed. Karin Bauer (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2011), 141. See also Losurdo 2024a, 143.

7 Rockhill 2025, 214.

condemned in his radical students. It might sound bizarre how the “critical theorist” Adorno died of a heart-attack not long after feminist students bared their chests at him in protest, but the more Adorno and Horkheimer rejected emancipation as beyond this world, the more they practically conformed to the status quo.⁸ Hegel might have told them that a stance of absolute scepticism tends to culminate in absolute pessimism – or what he described in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as the “unhappy consciousness”.

The fate of Horkheimer and Adorno had already been prophesied by the young Horkheimer of the 1920s. With great prescience, writing under the alias “Henrich Regius”, Horkheimer wrote the following in his *Dawn* (1926-1931) aphorisms:

The hedged approbation of Marxist theory, its respectful integration in the history of philosophy, is something the bourgeoisie likes to see. The correlate of this contemplative treatment of Marxism in real life is the accommodation to things as they are. To say that socialism does not “follow” from Marxist theory even though socialism is desirable, and to add nothing further, is to scientifically and morally justify capitalism. It is an expression of social skepticism.⁹

What better description of Horkheimer’s mature critical theory could there be than what Horkheimer himself wrote as a younger man? Between these *Dawn* aphorisms and the later *Decline* aphorisms (1950-1969), we see a striking sea-change in attitude. In *Decline*, Horkheimer’s conservatism, pessimism, and even religious mysticism are on full display; he seems fearful about almost everything. It cannot be the place of this essay to show exactly how the philosophical and political makeup of the young Horkheimer could possibly transition from early Luxemburgism toward something resembling neoconservatism. Yet the *Dawn* aphorisms are quite damning when viewed in light of the author’s later evolution, as a supporter of American intervention in Vietnam, the dismissal of the student movement as authoritarian, and using his clout as a “Marxist” academic to shame radicals.¹⁰

Horkheimer’s late pessimism also led to a kind of cultural chauvinism against the East. One key reason he supported the Vietnam War was his fear of Maoist China. Horkheimer’s paranoia is explicit in his worry of a Chinese invasion of Europe, warning that if the West failed to build up its arsenals and military capacities, then “the Chinese will be on the Rhine”.¹¹ Ryan Crawford details how Horkheimer’s descriptions of the Russians and Chinese in his later

8 On the feminist protest against Adorno, see Lisa Yun Lee, “The Bare-Breasts Incident,” in Renée J. Heberle, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Theodor Adorno* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 113-140.

9 Horkheimer 1978, 36.

10 See Peter M.R. Stirk, *Max Horkheimer: A New Introduction* (Boston: Barnes & Noble Books, 1992), 179-81.

11 Quoted in Ryan Crawford, “Critical Theory Consolidated: Foreword Regression in the Late Work of Max Horkheimer and Its American Reception”, *Critical Historical Studies* Vol. 12, No. 1 (Spring 2025): 91. According to Friedrich Pollock, Horkheimer regarded the Vietnam war as a ‘justified attempt to halt the Chinese in Asia’ and thought that US withdrawal would lead to a blood bath that ‘would also expedite China’s passage to the Rhine’. See also Stirk 1992, 179.

writings do not go beyond Cold War stereotypes. And, in a Burkean vein, Horkheimer condemned civil rights activists in Harlem for rejecting Western society: “so-called activists...are so close to the demagogues, because they do not want to see in today’s society what is worth preserving and expanding”.¹²

Finally, one cannot separate Horkheimer’s late conservatism from his abandonment of Marxist materialism. It is no coincidence that his rejection of Marxism in the *Decline* aphorisms also paralleled his dismissal of proletarian emancipation as a pipe dream. Whereas the young Horkheimer had drawn closer to Hegel and Marx, these influences were increasingly displaced by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Indeed, during this rightward turn, Horkheimer even concluded that Nietzsche was a greater thinker than Marx.¹³ More work needs to be done translating Horkheimer’s theoretical assumptions into their practical political implications. But it seems clear how such forms of theoretical pessimism can readily enable political reaction.¹⁴

12 Crawford 2025, 94.

13 Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzschean Legacy in Germany 1890-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 185.

14 For an excellent discussion of how the early Horkheimer transitioned to neoconservatism, see Stathis Kouvelakis, *La critique défaite: Émergence et domestication de la Théorie critique* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2019).

10 **MAGA Adornians**

In our interregnum between capitalism and socialism, as Gramsci would call it, we have witnessed some truly bizarre political symptoms. These include tendencies which attempt to transcend the traditional Left-Right divide, echoing in eerie ways the polarisation of the interwar period. On the Frankfurt School side, among those who favour the conservatism of Adorno and Horkheimer over the more radical positions of Marcuse, a new critique of “woke” liberalism has emerged, along with a rejection of the “totally administered society” that increasingly overlaps with themes found on the Right.

The transition from a left-wing orientation toward a more conservative one among Anglophone supporters of the Frankfurt School can be traced in the pages of *Telos* magazine during the 1980s and 1990s. Russell Berman, a *Telos* editor, is one of these exponents of a Critical Theory made compatible with what he calls “revolutionary conservatism”. In his introduction to Ernst Jünger’s *On Pain*, (published by *Telos* in 2008) Berman observes that Jünger’s critique of modernity shares certain premises with Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. While Jünger and the Frankfurt School’s political conclusions diverge, they share a fundamental rejection of mass consumerism, technological rationality, and historical optimism:

Jünger’s rejection of sentimentalist optimism and his insistence on the centrality of pain—by which he means loss, suffering, and death as well as genuine physical pain—to the human condition is akin to the dark vision of Schopenhauerian pessimism that suffuses Max Horkheimer’s thought. The blithe confidence in a collective “forward” that marked, and still marks, progressivism is no longer on the table. Whatever the consequences of the tragic sensibility—and there are various possible outcomes—it precludes the characteristic mentality of the historical optimist, best allegorised by the frozen smile of an emoticon: happy days aren’t here again... Finally, one can even argue a Doppelgänger resemblance between Jünger and Theodor Adorno ... they both share a post Weberian suspicion of bureaucracy; and they are both allergic to facile sentimentality. Perhaps most importantly, Adorno and Jünger present uncannily similar treatments of the demise of subjectivity.¹

As part of Berman’s concluding remarks to his introduction, he writes that Jünger “makes the strong case for revolution as conservative, rather than as emancipatory, and it ought to be read next to other revolutionary appeals, from Lenin’s *State and Revolution* to Bertolt Brecht’s

1 Russell A. Berman, “Preface”, in Ernst Jünger, *On Pain* (Candor, NY: Telos Press Publishing, 2008), viii-x.

The Measures Taken.²

After 2008, Berman went on to elaborate a framework that sought to transcend the Left-Right binary in favour of what he called the “gray zone”. But, like many attempts to move beyond Left and Right, Berman ended up firmly on the Right and endorsed Donald Trump’s presidency in 2016. What makes Berman’s endorsement unusual is the Adornian justification he offered for it. In a 2019 interview with a Swiss magazine, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ), he explained how he could simultaneously espouse Adornian theory and support Trump:

NZZ: Mr. Berman, you are a staunch supporter of the neoconservative American President Donald Trump. At the same time, you are a scholar and follower of the neo-Marxist philosopher Theodor W. Adorno. How do the two fit together?

Berman: Adorno has a lot to say to us today. Nobody has described the total socialisation [*Vergesellschaftung*] of all spheres of life better than he did – a tendency that has only increased following the philosopher’s death in 1969. In the West today – also in the US – we live in rigidly conformist societies, without understanding or describing them in these terms. For his part, Donald Trump is strongly committed to halting this socialisation, even to reversing it.³

Given Adorno’s many criticisms of right-wing demagoguery and the culture industry, it might seem odd for an Adorno scholar to support not only an authoritarian demagogue but also a reality television star. Nevertheless, this position is not a totally unique one today. The other prominent Adornian supporter of the Trump administration from academia is the self-described “Last Marxist”, Chris Cutrone.

Cutrone is the founder of the Platypus Affiliated Society, which eclectically synthesises post-Trotskyism, Adorno, and Moishe Postone. He began his political career as a member of the youth wing of the Spartacist League before pursuing graduate studies at the University of Chicago under Postone himself and the German philosophy scholar Robert Pippin. Cutrone wrote his doctoral dissertation on Adorno and Lenin, and has remained deeply influenced by the pessimism of the early Frankfurt School, going so far as to declare the entire Left “dead”. This pronouncement dovetailed with Cutrone’s own notion of “anti-anti-imperialism”, under which he supported everything from the US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq to Zionism – which he once described as containing a “rational kernel” of racism against Palestinians.⁴

2 Ibid. x.

3 Ishay Landa and Emancipations with Daniel Tutt. “Philosophy and the Rise of Fascism – Symposium on Lukács’s Destruction of Reason (Day One)”. *YouTube*. February 2, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsmoihSKvpg> and Russell A. Berman, “Donald Trump will den Status quo des Politbetriebs ändern”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, May 21, 2019. <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/trump-als-reformator-gegen-die-logik-der-verwalteten-welt-ld.1482709>

4 For a summary of the reactionary positions of the Platypus Affiliated Society, see Richard Seymour, et. all, “Open letter about the Platypus Affiliated Society”, *Lenin’s Tomb*, May 29, 2013. <http://www.leninology.co.uk/2013/06/open-letter-about-platypus-affiliated.html>; On Cutrone’s support for the annexation

During the second Trump administration, Cutrone's departure from Marxism became even more explicit in his support for US proposals to annex Panama, Greenland, and Canada. While much of Alex Gourevitch's essay on "Neoconservative Multipolarity" correctly identifies Cutrone's turn to the Right, we disagree that Cutrone's position is a form of "MAGA Trotskyism".⁵ Although Cutrone remains critical of Stalinism, a more fitting label for his current politics might be MAGA Adornianism, something he shares with Berman.

Cutrone's embrace of Trump's imperial ambitions is not entirely surprising. Back in 2016, he wrote an infamous article entitled "Why Not Trump?"⁶ While careful not to endorse a candidate outright, he argued that Trump was an anti-establishment "outsider", even portraying him as a moderate centrist opposed to official Washington liberalism. According to Cutrone, Trump rejected the "post-1960s identity politics of" race, gender and sexuality"... [which included] more minorities and women in the workforce and management". Yet Cutrone insisted that Trump's politics were not attacking the spirit of the 60s out of "racism" or "misogyny" but against the lowered expectations of the "new normal". Although he never states it directly, Cutrone strongly implies that this "new normal" was represented by Hillary Clinton.

This critique of managerial postmodern liberalism – seen as worse than good old-fashioned "bourgeois politics" – also appears in the work of Slavoj Žižek, a philosopher strongly influenced by Adorno's brand of negative dialectics and cultural criticism. But, like Berman and Cutrone, Žižek once remarked in an interview that he would rather vote for Trump over Clinton.⁷ The prioritisation of "authenticity" over so-called "woke" identity politics brings such arguments dangerously close to the paleoconservative rejection of managerial liberalism advanced by figures such as James Burnham, Samuel Francis, and Paul Gottfried. As we saw earlier, Gottfried, in particular, had little objection to Adorno and Horkheimer's criticisms of modernity, recognising that these themes could be more readily adopted to a

of Greenland, see Chris Cutrone, "The Future Belongs to America. So Should Greenland", *Compact Magazine*, January 9, 2025. <https://www.compactmag.com/article/the-future-belongs-to-america-so-should-greenland/>; In addition, see Chris Cutrone, "Iraq and the election: The fog of"anti-war" politics", *Platypus Review* 7, October 2008. <https://platypus1917.org/2008/10/01/iraq-and-the-election-the-fog-of-anti-war-politics/>; The Platypus Historians Group, "Catastrophe, historical memory and the Left: 60 years of Israel-Palestine", *Platypus Review* 5, May–July 2008. <https://platypus1917.org/2008/05/01/catastrophe-historical-memory-and-the-left-60-years-of-israel-palestine/>; Chris Cutrone, "Israel-Palestine and the"Left"", *Platypus Review* 163, February 2024. https://platypus1917.org/2024/02/01/israel-palestine-and-the-left/?fbclid=IwY2xjawQB_Z5leHRuA2FlbQIxMABicmlkETJUY2lySnR4ZklHY3FydXc2c3J0YwZhcHBfaWQzMjlyMDM5MTc4ODIwMDg5MgABHv5e870ZPNp5c_gp1nvLV2HRvT1x07brZWJEB5vJ03sCHp6Al8I06wvYkpFT_aem_o0e5DRBQhlwUpgZd9YhVSA

- 5 Alex Gourevitch, "Multipolar Neoconservatism", *The Northern Star*, February 15, 2025. <https://thenorthernstar.online/2025/02/15/multipolar-neoconservatism/>
- 6 Chris Cutrone, "Why not Trump?" *Platypus Review* 89, September 2016. <https://platypus1917.org/2016/09/06/why-not-trump/>
- 7 Ian Steinman, "From Farce to Tragedy: Žižek Endorses Trump", *Left Voice*, November 4, 2016. <https://www.left-voice.org/from-farce-to-tragedy-zizek-endorses-trump/>; For Žižek's connections to Adorno, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2008), 27, 200, and 254.

right-wing project rather than a left-wing one.

11 From “Global Class War” to Multipolarity

If the proletariat cannot be trusted or relied upon to fight its own battles, then one must look for someone else to wage them on its behalf. While Horkheimer and Adorno chose the West over the East as the last bastion of freedom against “totalitarianism”, we find the mirror image of their pessimism in the politics of Sam Marcy. For Marcy – an American ex-Trotskyist who gravitated towards Rockhill’s “Actually Existing Socialism” – the only way to combat imperialism was to abandon the idea of permanent revolution and instead (uncritically) side with the Soviet Union and its geopolitical allies.

Marcy had originally been a member of the American Socialist Workers’ Party (SWP), but he broke with the majority following the events in Hungary in 1956. While most of the SWP supported the Hungarian Revolution as a genuine workers’ uprising, Marcy adopted the opposite position, condemning it as counterrevolutionary. Whether workers themselves understood it or not, he argued, the uprising objectively played into the hands of US imperialism and the CIA. To the shock of the SWP majority, Marcy and his followers supported Soviet tanks rolling into Budapest and the bloody suppression of the Hungarian Revolution. The epithet “tankie” was later used to describe such supporters of Soviet intervention into Hungary, particularly in Britain. But the term applies with equal force to Sam Marcy’s own neo-Stalinist turn.¹

After leaving the SWP in 1959, Marcy formed the Workers’ World Party (WWP). As a matter of programme, the WWP advanced the theory of “Global Class War”.² According to this conception, the geopolitical conflict between the USSR and American imperialism superseded the class struggle internationally and inside every country. As a result, during the Cold War, Marcy stood for the uncritical defence of the USSR, China, Cuba, and their non-socialist allies. In practice, this meant that any criticism of these “progressive” forces was treated as objectively counterrevolutionary.

The Marcyites attempted to justify the theory of Global Class War on dialectical grounds, arguing that it expressed Lenin’s idea of the struggle between opposites. But, as SWP critics like Arne Swabeck pointed out, their notion of Leninist dialectics was hopelessly rigid and dualistic, leaving no room for the interpenetration and transformation of opposites. Consequently, there was no space for nuance when it came to workers’ uprisings against their

1 Arne Swabeck, “Marxist Method and the Lessons of the Hungarian Revolution: A Reply to Marcy and Grey”, *Marxists internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/swp-us/idb/swp-1946-59/db/v18n06-mar-1957-db.pdf>; On the Hungarian Revolution itself, see Peter Fryer, *Hungarian Tragedy* (London: Index Books, 1997). On the origin of the term “tankie”, see Stephen Driver, *Understanding British Party Politics* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 154.

2 See Greene 2023, 274.

bureaucratic overlords. Workers were presented with a stark choice: either support those same Soviet rulers or become pawns of Western imperialism.

The collapse of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc between 1989 and 1991 forced a modification of Marcy's conception of Global Class War. The WWP continued to defend the five remaining "Marxist-Leninist" states – China, Cuba, North Korea, Laos, and Vietnam – but the scope of its doctrine expanded. Marcy now stood for the uncritical defence of virtually any force perceived to be an enemy of American imperialism. Alongside nominally socialist states, the WWP has therefore championed decidedly anti-communist forces such as the mullahs of Iran (who massacred tens of thousands of communists), the Assad dictatorship in Syria, and the revanchist presidency of Vladimir Putin in Russia.³ The Marcyites portray these regimes as progressive and anti-imperialist, while treating virtually every worker protest against them as a CIA-backed "color revolution", regardless of the evidence. In effect, their outlook amounts to a form of social democratic "lesser evilism" on the terrain of global politics.

Following the death of Sam Marcy in 1998, a split occurred among his heirs in the WWP in 2004. From this split – very much in the Maoist spirit of "one divides into two!" – two new Marcyite parties emerged: the original Workers' World Party and the Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL). Unlike the overwhelming majority of leftist splits, the reasons for this division have never been clearly articulated. The founders of the PSL claimed that the WWP leadership failed to uphold Marcy's legacy. But, in terms of practice and programme, there is no discernible difference between the two organisations. Beyond personality conflicts, the exact political reasons for the split remain a mystery.

The background on Marcyism is relevant here for the simple reason that Gabriel Rockhill was a member of the PSL at least in 2021.⁴ Many of Rockhill's positions reflect the PSL's broader worldview and political outlook. This is particularly true in his advocacy of "multipolarity". Multipolarity is a conception of international affairs that favours different power blocs rather than a unipolar system dominated by a single hegemon (i.e. the United States). Like earlier Marcyism, multipolarity replaces the class struggle of the international proletariat with geostrategic *realpolitik*.

In line with multipolarity, Rockhill supports rivals to the United States as anti-imperialist. This includes states such as Iran, China, and Russia. With regard to the latter, Rockhill believes that the Russian bourgeoisie is torn between nationalist and socialist wings. How the Russian bourgeoisie as a class could possess a "socialist" orientation is quite the example of "non-reductive" Marxism. It is true that Rockhill has gone on record stating that he does not

3 Workers World, "Iran: What fraud?" *Workers World*, June 17, 2009. https://www.workers.org/2009/editorial/s/iran_0625/; Bronx Anti-War Coalition, "Syria: The beating heart of the Axis of Resistance", *Workers World*, December 3, 2024. <https://www.workers.org/2024/12/82283/>; Otis Grotewohl, "Putin's trip to North Korea, Vietnam weakens US imperialism", *Workers World*, June 29, 2024. <https://www.workers.org/2024/06/79451/>

4 Claudia De la Cruz and Gabriel Rockhill, "Culture as a weapon of class warfare: An interview with Claudia De La Cruz", *Liberation School*, June 15, 2021. <https://liberationschool.org/culture-as-a-weapon-of-class-warfare/>

support the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Nevertheless, he claims that "internationally, the role that Russia is playing is one of the leading forces in struggling very directly against US-led imperialism. On the world stage, Russia is playing – partly – a progressive role".⁵

Contrary to some "Marxist-Leninist" parties, there is nothing anti-imperialist about the Russian bourgeoisie or the rule of Vladimir Putin. For one, Putin is a diehard anti-communist who benefited immensely from the collapse of the USSR. He has condemned Lenin and Bolshevism while promoting the revival of Russian nationalism, Orthodoxy, and revanchism. Added to this are the reinforcement of patriarchal traditionalism, laws on the books discriminating against homosexuality, and the growth of antisemitic and neo-fascist movements. The resulting political atmosphere bears more resemblance to the pogromist Black Hundreds than to the original Bolsheviks.

Nevertheless, there is one Soviet leader whom Putin touts as a hero of Russian history. While he condemns Lenin – going so far as to blame the first Soviet premier for the creation of an independent Ukraine – Putin expresses a far more positive attitude toward Joseph Stalin.⁶ Like many contemporary Marxist-Leninists, he calls for a more "balanced assessment" of the General Secretary's legacy. While acknowledging the repression under his reign, Putin still praises Stalin for defeating the Nazis in WWII, industrialising the Soviet Union, and turning Russia into a superpower.⁷ Yet none of this admiration has anything to do with Stalin as a Marxist. Instead, Putin elevates Stalin into the pantheon of great Russian nationalists. The horrible vice of "great Russian chauvinism" that Lenin once condemned in Stalin is now celebrated by Putin as his defining virtue.

5 See his remarks around 39-40 minutes in Critical Theory Workshop. "Multipolarity and the Role of the Left–Gabriel Rockhill Compilation". *YouTube*. July 14, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9Od4HoWkHs>.

6 For Putin's view on Lenin, Stalin, and Ukraine, see Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation", *The Kremlin*, February 21, 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>

7 Dmitry Solovyov, "Putin calls for balanced assessment of Stalin", *Reuters*, December 3, 2009. <https://www.reuters.com/article/economy/putin-calls-for-balanced-assessment-of-stalin-idUSGEE5B21J6/>

As we near the end of our essay, we want to address the connection between socialism in one country and antisemitism. We need to be careful here and be precise about what our argument is. We are not claiming that antisemitism is a necessary component of such a policy, nor that it can be directly deduced from Stalinism itself. However, there is a structural risk of it, and it is no coincidence that far-right antisemites have found Stalin congenial to their own worldview. We have demonstrated above that the consequences of socialism in one country were disastrous for world revolution. But we want to go further and explain why so many fascists have fallen in love with “Uncle Joe”, and how the seemingly abstract and antiquarian debate between Stalin and Trotsky over foreign policy planted the seeds of nationalism, chauvinism, and other retrograde political phenomena. In this faction fight within the Russian Communist Party, fascists clearly and overwhelmingly favoured one side over the other.

First, let us clarify again what socialism in one country is. Originally developed jointly by Stalin and Nikolai Bukharin in the mid-1920s, this theory argued that the Soviet Union could develop socialism on its own without waiting for a proletarian revolution in the advanced capitalist countries. Socialism in one country also served as a mobilising slogan for the bureaucracy by stoking latent nationalism among party cadres and encouraging the belief that Russia had a special messianic destiny. Trotsky’s rejection of this policy was portrayed by Stalin as “defeatism” and pessimism, since he allegedly lacked confidence in the Russian people to go out on their own. When Trotsky spoke of backwardness and the need to overcome it, Stalin explained it away, unwilling to hurt Russian national pride. He could then depict Trotsky’s position as “permanent hopelessness” and a repudiation of socialism.¹ In the abstract, socialism in one country did not abandon world revolution and often paid lip service to it. But, in practice, global revolution was always subordinated to the immediate needs of the Soviet bureaucracy, a priority Stalin justified with the constant refrain of “the primacy of practice”.

Under the period of high Stalinism in the 1930s onward, Soviet ideology became more explicitly nationalist and socially conservative.² If the main political unit was no longer the international working class but the Soviet bureaucracy masquerading as “the nation”, then genuine internationalism could only appear as a threat. Once reality was conceived as “multi-

1 Joseph V. Stalin, “The October Revolution and Tactics of Russian Communists”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1924/12.htm>

2 See Greene 2023, 306-10 and Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 148-72.

polar”, or as a pluriverse of nations in brutal competition with one another, any group or party such as the Fourth International or the POUM that laid claim to internationalism was seen as automatically suspect. Real Internationalism was unmasked as “rootless cosmopolitanism”, supposedly in the service of fascism, imperialism, and foreign powers. The late Stalinist denunciation of “Zionist cosmopolitanism”, peaking in the antisemitic Doctors’ Plot of 1952, gave Stalin’s campaign a disturbing resonance with Carl Schmitt’s dictum that “whoever invokes humanity wants to cheat”.³

If, for fascists, Jewish people represented a subversive and destabilising force to national cultures, then for Stalin “Trotskyism” functioned as a parallel threat. Jean-Paul Sartre noticed this affinity between antisemitism and anti-Trotskyism in *What Is Literature?*: “For the Stalinist a Trotskyist is an incarnation of evil, like the Jew for Maurras. Everything that comes from him is necessarily bad”.⁴ Beyond Sartre, fascists also saw in Joseph Stalin something that reflected their own politics. After the last major Show Trial in 1938, Benito Mussolini could not help but express admiration for the General Secretary. He saluted him as a figure who had finally abandoned Bolshevism for fascism: “Stalin has secretly become a Fascist... Stalin has rendered a praiseworthy service to fascism by tossing out its declared enemies, however impotent they may be”.⁵

Despite the insistence on “Trotskyite-Fascist” collusion alleged by Moscow during the 1930s, the Nazis themselves seemed to approve of the purges. According to Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, Hitler believed that Stalin was “a typical Asiatic Russian” but that he had “removed the West European leadership” in the USSR.⁶ By “West European”, Hitler meant the Jews in the party leadership. In fact, Goebbels reported that Hitler believed Stalin was liquidating the Jews under the name of Trotskyism. Goebbels quoted the Führer: “Will Stalin gradually liquidate the Jews? Perhaps he only calls them Trotskyists to fool the world”.⁷ Thus, even though Hitler still saw the USSR as his main ideological and racial adversary, there was a note of approval in his view of Stalin’s purge of “Trotskyists”.

Going back to the 1920s, Hitler saw Stalin as the representative of “Jewish Bolshevism”, calling any proposed alliance between Germany and Soviet Russia a deadly trap.⁸ The idea of “National Bolshevism”, which was gaining popularity among far-right intellectuals like the Jünger brothers and Ernst Niekisch, was anathema to Hitler, appearing to him as a potential Trojan horse for “Jewish” influence. Nevertheless, Hitler admired Stalin as a strongman and

3 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996), 54. On the Doctor’s Plot, see Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 619-27.

4 Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 257.

5 Benito Mussolini, “5 Marzo 1938”, in *Opera Omnia Benito Mussolini XXIX* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1959), 64. [Our translation]

6 Peter Longerich, *Hitler: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 684.

7 Ibid. 685.

8 Adolf Hitler, *Hitler’s Second Book: The Unpublished Sequel to Mein Kampf*, trans. Krista Smith (New York: Enigma Books, 2003), 144-45.

envied his tactical ruthlessness in crushing internal factions.

During Operation Barbarossa, when the Soviets hardened their resistance against the Nazi invasion of Russia, Hitler showed a measure of respect for his adversary. In January 1942, at the height of the German war against the Soviet Union, Hitler claimed that Stalin only pretended to be a Bolshevik:

Stalin pretends to have been the herald of the Bolshevik revolution. In actual fact, he identifies himself with the Russia of the Tsars, and he has merely resurrected the tradition of Pan-Slavism. For him Bolshevism is only a means, a disguise designed to trick the Germanic and Latin peoples.⁹

A few months later, in August, Hitler saw fit to praise Stalin for mercilessly crushing all political rivals. He went so far as to say “Stalin is half beast, half giant. To the social side of life he is utterly indifferent. The people can rot, for all he cares. If we had given him another ten years, Europe would have been swept away, as it was at the time of the Huns”.¹⁰ The way Hitler admires Stalin brings to mind Nietzsche’s statement in the *Genealogy of Morals* about Napoleon being a synthesis of superman and monster. At a deeper ideological level, what Hitler, Stalin, and Nietzsche all share is a “Bonapartist” politics, i.e., a politics centred on authoritarian rule.¹¹

In fascist discourse, when Stalin is not denounced as an agent of “Judeo-Bolshevism”, he is praised for his Russian nationalism, which supposedly destroyed “Jewish Marxism”. As we noted before, Stalin became a hero for a strange far-right current labelled “National Bolshevism”. A political oxymoron, Bolshevism for these fascists could be reclaimed on national chauvinist grounds to oppose cosmopolitanism. The archenemy of National Bolshevism was international globalism and its main political leader, Leon Trotsky.

For National Bolsheviks, Stalin’s real and esoteric purpose was not to spread international Marxism, but to crush it. This turn towards Stalin on the German far right started with the work of the Jünger brothers and Ernst Niekisch, who often preferred the USSR to Western imperialism.¹² The *völkisch* thinker Artur Dinter expressed the main idea of National Bolshevism when he proposed a military alliance between Germany and Russia. Since Stalin had already purged Trotsky and the “internationalist Jews”, Dinter concluded that the USSR had

9 Adolf Hitler, *Hitler’s Table Talk, 1941 – 1944: His Private Conversations* (New York: Enigma Books, 2000), 182.

10 Ibid. 624. See Nietzsche’s comments on Napoleon in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 33.

11 For a thorough analysis on Nietzsche’s Bonapartism, see Don Dombowsky, *Nietzsche and Napoleon: The Dionysian Conspiracy* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014).

12 In 1939, Niekisch was imprisoned in a concentration camp by Nazi Germany. In 1945, he emerged in shattered health and blind. Afterward, Niekisch seemingly adopted orthodox Marxist politics and lived in East Germany until 1953. See Philip Rees, *Biographical Dictionary of the Extreme Right Since 1890* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 280.

effectively become a country of “national socialism”.¹³

These German fascists were not alone in their love for Stalin. Similar sentiments appeared on the French far right, notably in the writings of the novelist and Vichy collaborator Pierre Drieu La Rochelle. In 1941, Drieu wrote in his diary that, if Nietzsche had lived to the age of eighty, he would recognise Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini as “his sons ... according to the first order of the spirit, they are his [spiritual] sons”.¹⁴ By August 1944, as Germany’s defeat became inevitable, Drieu believed that Nietzschean aristocratic principles were no longer adequately embodied in Nazism, but were now incarnated in the victorious Soviet Union. He even contemplated surrendering to the Communists in order to declare that Stalin had been right before facing his own execution.¹⁵

Following the Second World War, the American neo-Nazi Francis Parker Yockey looked favourably upon the anti-cosmopolitan campaign in the USSR and the anti-Tito purges in Eastern Europe. In December 1952, Yockey wrote an article entitled “What Is Behind the Hanging of the Eleven Jews in Prague?” about the Slánský trial in Czechoslovakia. The trial involved fourteen high-ranking Czech communists and had overt antisemitic overtones, as eleven of the defendants were Jewish. According to Yockey, the Slánský trial signalled that the Eastern Bloc was embracing nationalism by removing “Jewish cosmopolitans”:

The Stalin regime began its inner policy of dropping numerous Jews from the highest governmental positions, then slowly purging them from the lesser positions as well... The Prague Trials have gone off with an explosive roar to waken this European fascist elite to active resistance against the death plans being hatched for European Culture in Washington by American Jewry. The fact is: The Russian leadership is killing Jews for treason to Russia, for service to the Jewish entity [i.e., Israel]. Nothing can gainsay or reverse this fact.¹⁶

Before dealing with more contemporary far-right admirers of Stalin, we should highlight two fascists in the post-war scene. One example is the “former” Nazi Major-General Otto E. Remer

13 Quoted in Kevin Coogan, *Dreamer of the Day: Francis Parker Yockey and the Postwar Fascist International* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1999), 278.

14 Robert Soucy, *Fascist Intellectual: Drieu La Rochelle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 191.

15 See Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, *Pierre Drieu La Rochelle: Journal 1939-1945*, ed. Julien Hervier (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992), 349-50 and 417-18. [Our translation]

16 Quoted in Coogan 1999, 266-67. The antisemitic nature of the Czechoslovakian purges was noted by Artur London, one of the defendants. In his memoirs, London compares his interrogators to the Nazi SS: “What did this anti-Semitism, this pogrom spirit, have in common with Marx, Lenin and the Party? This was the first time in my adult life that I was insulted because I was a Jew and was held to be a criminal because of my race, and that by a man from the State Security of a Socialist country, a member of the Communist Party. Was it possible that the mentality of the SS had arisen in our own ranks? ... Soon after my arrest, when I was confronted by a virulent, Nazi-type of antisemitism, I thought it was limited to a few individuals. The Security Services couldn’t be expected to recruit saints for such a dirty job. But I now realised that even if this mentality only appeared sporadically during the interrogations, it was nevertheless a systematic line”. Artur London, *The Confession* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), 173-74.

and his Socialist Reich Party (SRP), which advocated a neutralist line for West Germany against the Allied Occupation. Officially, Remer presented himself as supporting Europe as an independent “third force”, equally opposed to capitalism and communism. However, in practice, the SRP was working with both Soviet intelligence and the KPD. According to former SRP member and Remer confidant, Bela Ewald Althaus: “It’s one of those funny parts of German history after the war...For a while in the early 1950s, the Socialist Reich Party was funded by Russia, the KPD was not”.¹⁷ In the United States, there was also the case of Fred Farrel, a leading columnist of an anti-communist newspaper called *Common Sense*. Farrel adopted a pro-Soviet stance, remarking in 1974 that “the best anti-Communists I have ever known were the Stalinists. They fought Communism with a cold deadly, remorseless, realistic efficiency”.¹⁸

By the late Brezhnev-era USSR, “Marxism-Leninism” remained the guiding ideology, but, among many Soviet propagandists, it increasingly assumed a National Bolshevik form. Under the banner of “anti-Zionism”, Soviet ideologues began espousing overt antisemitism and racism. They miscast the American-Israeli relationship where the tail wags the dog. In other words, they believed that Israelis (i.e., “the Jews”) were calling the shots of the US government and not the other way around. For instance, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the newspaper of the Communist Youth League, lifted antisemitic passages from a neo-Nazi pamphlet entitled *America — A Zionist Colony* written by Johann von Leers. Other authors attacked Free Masons and claimed the Russians were an Aryan people. Such Soviet antisemitism and racial mythmaking found a receptive audience among segments of the far right in Europe.¹⁹

In the final days of the Soviet Union, there was a growing convergence between the Russian far right and elements of the Communist Party, as both believed their society was being destroyed by cosmopolitan Jews. In 1988, party member Nina Andreyeva blamed Gorbachev’s *Perestroika* reforms for creating ideological confusion and “national nihilism”. In an essay “I Cannot Waive Principles”, she defended traditional Stalinism while indulging in open antisemitism, condemning Trotsky as a cosmopolitan who rejected the Russian nation:

Another peculiarity of the views held by the “left-wing liberals” is an overt or covert cosmopolitan tendency, some kind of non-national “internationalism”. I read somewhere about an incident after the revolution when a delegation of merchants and factory owners called on Trotsky “as a Jew” at the Petrograd soviet to complain about the oppression by the Red Guards, and he declared that he was “not a Jew but an internationalist”, which really puzzled the petitioners... I am also convinced that any denigration of the importance of [national] consciousness produces a pacifist erosion of defense and patriotic consciousness as well as a desire to categorise the slightest

¹⁷ Quoted in Martin A. Lee, *The Beast Reawakens* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 74.

¹⁸ Kerry Bolton, “Soviet anti-Zionism and the American Right”, *Kerry Bolton*. <https://www.kerry-bolton.com/soviet-anti-zionism-and-the-american-right/>

¹⁹ Lee 1997, 167-68.

expressions of Great Russian national pride as manifestations of the chauvinism of a great power.²⁰

As the monolithic rule of the Communist Party began to disintegrate, far right and antisemitic groups such as *Pamyat* (Memory) emerged. Originally formed by Dmitri Vasiliev in the early 1980s as “The Society for the Lovers of History and Literature,” *Pamyat* started to promote Czarism while attacking Jews and Freemasons. Its members adopted fascist-style black uniforms and jackboots, and in line with Stalinist hardliners, they opposed Gorbachev’s reforms. In many respects this moment marked the beginning of the “Red-Brown” alliance, in which Russian nationalism and Soviet nostalgia fused to challenge the United States and “Zionist” globalists.²¹

One of *Pamyat*’s members was Alexander Dugin, a translator of Martin Heidegger and Julius Evola. By the early 1990s, Dugin had broken from *Pamyat* and adopted National-Bolshevik style politics. He collaborated closely with one of the largest components of the defunct Soviet Communist Party – the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) led by Gennady Zyuganov. In fact, Dugin was one of the authors of the CPRF’s political programme.²² Despite its communist label, the CPRF rarely invokes Marx and Lenin; instead, it combines Stalin nostalgia with avowedly nationalist and antisemitic rhetoric. Zyuganov sees the Russian nation as the last barrier to global cosmopolitan rule: “We [Russians] are the last power on this planet that is capable of mounting a challenge to the New World Order — the global cosmopolitan dictatorship.”²³ It is worth noting here Rockhill believes that the CPRF is part of a “very powerful communist movement” which plays a leading role in Putin’s project of “national restoration.”²⁴

Dugin later worked with Eduard Limonov to found the National-Bolshevik Party in 1993. Over the decades, he has been involved with a number of National-Bolshevik and Eurasian organisations. In 1997, Dugin openly proclaimed that Russia required a “Russian national socialism” that would constitute “an authentic, real, radically revolutionary and consistent fascism, a fascist fascism.”²⁵ He believed that National Bolshevism would transcend the “left-right” dichotomy by combining ultranationalism and revolutionary communist élan:

National Bolshevism can be most successfully and completely defined as follows:

20 Nina Andreyeva, “I Cannot Waive Principles”, in *Gorbachev and Glasnost: Viewpoints from the Soviet Press*, ed. Isaac J. Tarasulo (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1990), 286.

21 See Lee 1997, 306–07; Coogan 1999, 557; Walter Laqueur, *Fascism: Past, Present, Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 128, 180–82, 191, and 199.

22 Lee 1997, 320.

23 Ibid.

24 See his remarks beginning at 27:00 in “Multipolarity and the Role of the Left—Gabriel Rockhill Compilation”. In the same video, Rockhill even claims that Russia is not a capitalist country.

25 Aleksandr Dugin, “Fascism – Borderless and Red”, in *Fascism Past and Present, West and East*, ed. Roger Griffin, Werner Loh and Andreas Umland (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2006), 510.

“National Bolshevism is a super-ideology shared by all enemies of the open society”. That is to say, it is not simply one of the ideologies inimical to such a society, but rather it is that society’s total, deliberate, and essential antithesis... In other words, the National Bolsheviks, reaching into the beyond of ideologies, grasped the essence both of the enemy camp and of their own metaphysical position...²⁶

For Dugin, National Bolshevism champions the Russian people against globalism and the US-led Atlantic bloc. He also claims that Stalin exemplified National Bolshevism and pragmatism in defence of the Russian nation: “For its own part, Right National Bolshevism is bound with the figure of Joseph Stalin... And even though Stalin, in his inner-party struggle with Trotsky, had initially formed a bloc with Zinoviev and Bukharin, he would gradually defeat the two of them precisely with the support of the conservative, Right National Bolshevik sector in the Party, cultivated by Stalin through ‘Lenin’s call’ for new national cadres that had preserved a link with the essence of the people and a feeling for the state”.²⁷ By contrast, the internationalists around Trotsky are portrayed as alien to the Russian soil or people – Dugin’s “Narod” – and are even linked to more nefarious forces such as Freemasonry.²⁸

Beyond Russia, Dugin sees the Trotsky-Stalin conflict reappearing in American politics between progressives and conservatives. In his view, modern “progressives” resemble Trotskyists advocating global revolution, whereas conservatives represent defenders of national order against cosmopolitan elites:

In the USA, there is a real war between ‘progressives’ and ‘conservatives’. However, it is unequal: conservatives believe that progressives, although mistaken, have the right to exist, while progressives brand all conservatives as ‘fascists’ and insist that they have no right to life and their ideas have no right to exist. They are the ‘enemies of the open society’ (Popper) who must be destroyed preemptively — before they can destroy the open society. Thus, progressives are about [being] woke and cancelling. The core of progressives are Trotskyists — both direct (the left wing of the Democratic Party) and those who have become neocons (such as Robert Kagan, William Kristol, Victoria Nuland, etc.). Essentially, progressives are proponents of the liberal and globalist World Revolution and Jacobin terror.²⁹

Alexander Dugin elaborated his version of multipolarity in *Foundations of Geopolitics* (1997). There, he argues that world politics is structured by a global conflict between a US-led Atlantic bloc and a Eurasian bloc centred on Russia. According to Dugin, American-style capitalism homogenises the world by undermining traditional values and local cultures.

26 Aleksandr Dugin, *Templars of the Proletariat* (London: Arktos, 2023), 8.

27 Ibid. 64-5.

28 Ibid. 66, 77, and 143.

29 @Agdchan (Alexander Dugin), “The Tucker Carlson Interview: Terminology Explained”, *Twitter*, May 2, 2024, 2:47 p.m., www.twitter.com/Agdchan/status/1786105224509157429

Russia, by contrast, supposedly represents nationally rooted peoples resisting cosmopolitan elites. Borrowing from Schmitt, Dugin recasts this clash between modernity and tradition as a struggle between commercialist “sea” empires and traditionalist “land” civilisations – another way of expressing the same National Bolshevism in geographical form.³⁰

Dugin has proven to be an influential thinker for far-right organisations and figures globally. In the US, one of the more unusual followers of Dugin is Caleb Maupin, a journalist for *Russia Today* and leader of the Center for Political Innovation. Originally a member of the WWP, Maupin left around 2015, and although he dropped formal adherence to Marxism-Leninism, he has repurposed many of its key components and themes for his own syncretic ideology. Over the following years, Maupin embraced conspiracist populism and aligned himself with figures such as Trump, LaRouche, Putin, and Dugin. In 2018, Maupin travelled to Russia, where he spoke alongside Dugin at the Alternatives to Globalisation Conference. In his remarks, Maupin identified himself as a populist who supported Trump’s attacks on “international bankers” disloyal to the United States, while also praising Stalin’s social conservatism.³¹

In one of Maupin’s latest books entitled *Mystical Stalinism*, he adopts Dugin’s geopolitical metaphysics to attack Trotskyism. According to Maupin, Dugin makes a distinction between “land Marxism” and “sea Marxism”. Politics of the land are supposedly correct, while the politics of the sea just promote imperialism and globalism:

Alexander Dugin ... has emphasised geopolitics, contrasting thalassocracy (empire of the sea) and tellurocracy (empires of the land). He interprets Stalin’s defeat of Trotsky as the “land” civilisation asserting itself within communism and defeating the “sea” Marxism of Trotsky and Lenin. Stalin is believed, by Dugin and many other Russian anti-Western thinkers, to be an expression of the “civilisation of the land” repelling the “empires of the sea”.³²

Maupin further associates Trotskyism with what he regards as degenerate forms of Western Marxism, conflating both with “cosmopolitan” Jewish intellectuals. As he puts it, “in the work of Adorno, Arendt, Sontag, and so many of these CIA-funded” New Left” academics, we find longstanding sentiments among the Jewish community, rooted perhaps in the Talmudic belief system itself”.³³ Maupin goes on to argue how these Jewish intellectuals cultivated a victim mentality and a sense of chosenness rooted in their “Talmudic” attitude: “As a result,

30 See John Dunlop, “Aleksandr Dugin’s Foundations of Geopolitics”, *Demokratisatsiya* 12 (2004): 43 – 44. For more on Dugin and the Alt-Right generally, see Harrison Fluss and Landon Frim, “Behemoth and Leviathan: The Fascist Bestiary of the Alt-Right”, *Salvage*, December 21, 2017. <https://salvage.zone/behemoth-and-leviathan-the-fascist-bestiary-of-the-alt-right/>

31 Socialism For All Intensify Class Struggle. “Caleb Maupin & Aleksandr Dugin at 2018 Conference: Nazbol, Populist, or What? S4A Investigates”. *YouTube*. November 9, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAr-ranse13M>

32 Caleb T. Maupin, *Mystical Stalinism & The Struggle Against Revisionism in America* (Center for Political Innovation, 2026), 139 and 145.

33 *Ibid.* 186-87.

they will always become targets of gentiles who seek to disobey God and live according to their own desires, and want to exterminate Jews in order to protect their "freedom" from divine authority".³⁴

For Maupin, this sense of Jewish intellectuals as permanently marginal – or being outside of gentile society – makes them automatically elitist and anti-populist. According to him:

[In] the anti-populism of the 'New Left' thinkers, most of them Trotskyites and New York Intellectuals, funded by American intelligence to oppose the Soviet Union in leftist terms, we see a revival of "the spirit of the ghetto". The masses of people are presented as a vulgar mob of hateful bigots, to be manipulated by demagogues and tyrants who would suppress freedom. Joe McCarthy, Joseph Stalin, and Adolf Hitler are all just representatives of the evil found within the hearts of mankind (or perhaps in the hearts of *goyim*).

"The people" for Maupin and Dugin are not the masses; they are closer to Dugin's *Narod*, or what German fascists refer to as the *Volk*. When Thomas Mann still stood on the conservative Right, he put the distinction this way: "The individualistic mass is democratic, the Volk is aristocratic".³⁵ The *Volk* are not the atomised, uprooted, and materialist masses of urban civilisation, but the blood and soil, God-fearing, and traditional people of authentic culture. In Maupin's narrative, Stalin was born of the people, a true son of Mother Russia. He was not like Lenin the son of an intellectual, nor was he like Trotsky, the son of a wealthy Jewish landlord. Instead, he was from humble stock and thus possessed a deeper connection to the Russian peasantry.

Moreover, according to Maupin, the relationship between Stalin and the Russian people was a mystical one. The framework he adopts to understand this connection is lifted from Evola. In *Men Among the Ruins*, the Italian fascist argues that "primitive man essentially obeyed not the strongest members of society, but those in whom he perceived a saturation of mana (i.e., a sacred energy and life force) and who, for this reason seemed to him best qualified to perform activities usually precluded to others ... to depend on such leaders constituted not the subjugation but rather the elevation of a person".³⁶ Maupin claims that Stalin's cult of personality relied on this form of "mana". It was the kind of "sacred energy and life force" that Stalin supposedly shared in common with figures like Mao and Abraham Lincoln, enabling them to "repel the empires of the sea". But to understand Stalin in this way, Maupin argues, we must go beyond the limits of original "Marxism-Leninism and Dialectical Materialism".

Maupin is not alone in appreciating Stalin through the lens of fascist philosophy. The internet personality Haz Al-Din (Ali Hammound) is the founder of the National-Bolshevik

34 Ibid. 210-11.

35 Quoted in Landa 2018, 9.

36 Julius Evola, *Men Among the Ruins: Post-War Reflections of a Radical Traditionalist* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 2002), 142.

“American Communist Party” (ACP) and the originator of the oxymoronic concept of “MAGA Communism”. He believes that Stalin and Marxism-Leninism can best be understood with the philosophies of Dugin and Martin Heidegger. In this way, Haz defends “socialism in one country” as an expression of a rooted people and a civilisation purged of universalism.³⁷

The well-known American shock jock and far-right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones has also gone on record praising Stalin. He claims that Trotsky is one of the principal sources of evil in the modern world: “The modern leftist movement and the modern neo-con movement hails to Trotsky. That is a fact. Trotsky did not have the regular communist model. He had another model”.³⁸ Like Dugin, Jones also believes that Trotskyism is the hidden hand behind the major political forces in the United States: “The ghost of Trotsky controls Barack Obama, it controls the Bushes, it controls the Republican leadership, the Mitch McConnells, the Mike Johnsons of the world”.³⁹

Despite his anti-communism, Jones expressed deep regret that Stalin did not succeed in killing all Trotskyists within the Soviet Union: “Stalin kicks them out. They come over here and now they are the Republican Party. Hardcore Trotskyites! Hardcore! They give you the Patriot Act and everything else. We’re in deep trouble. We are in deep, deep, deep, deep, deep trouble. I only wish Stalin would’ve got all of them. I got to be quite honest”.⁴⁰ In addition, Jones has promoted the online commentator and ACP member Jackson Hinkle, who also claims that Trotskyists control the world: “The world is run by Trotskyites... These are the most evil sick human beings on the planet. It’s the Clintonites, the Bushites, the World Economic Forum, and Klaus Schwab. It’s everyone who stands opposed to the American working class”.⁴¹

Another frequent guest on The Alex Jones Show is the white nationalist agitator Nick Fuentes. A Holocaust denier and leader of the so-called “Groyper movement”, Fuentes has sought to pressure the Trump administration from the Right. However, many observers on the Right were surprised when he expressed a particular admiration for Joseph Stalin. As he told the conservative host Tucker Carlson, he always remembers the date December 18th,

37 On the National-Bolshevik, if not outright fascist, politics of the misnamed American Communist Party, see Buffy Summers, “MAGA Communism?! The Reactionary Politics of the American Communist Party”, *Firebrand*, August 8, 2025. <https://firebrand.red/2025/08/maga-communism-the-reactionary-politics-of-the-american-communist-party/>

38 Alex Jones, “Alex Jones Interviews Jackson Hinkle, The Mega-Viral ‘MAGA Communist’”, *Infowars*, November 9, 2023, (5:31-5:40). www.infowars.com/posts/alex-jones-interviews-jackson-hinkle-the-mega-viral-maga-communist

39 @thebarrackslive (The Barracks), “ Alex Jones:”The ghost of Trotsky controls Barack Obama, it controls the Bushes, it controls the Republican leadership, the Mitch McConnells, the Mike Johnsons of the world”, *Twitter*, April 24, 2024, 9:19 a.m., www.twitter.com/thebarrackslive/status/1783123476465021108

40 YoureAllLosers0x0, “In which Alex Jones discovers post-Trotskyism (neoconservatism) and becomes a Stalinist”.

41 Alex Jones, “Alex Jones Interviews Jackson Hinkle, the Mega-Viral ‘Maga-Communist.’” *Banned.Video*. 2022. <https://banned.video/watch?id=654d6f8a668ba733e3d56648>

Stalin's birthday. He told Carlson "he's a fan" and "an admirer" of the General Secretary.⁴² On Fuentes' own programme, he praised Stalin as a giant of history, who built his country into a superpower. He even told his audience that he has been reading the work of Grover Furr:

I'm getting into some of the revisionist history by Grover Furr. I got put onto that by Academic Agent [a Traditionalist supporter of Julius Evola]. Just interesting from an academic point of view. I always thought Stalin was far more fascinating than Hitler and Napoleon, but that's just me personally... Somebody says this dude's admiration for Stalin is fucked up. Dude, you wouldn't get it. It's like anything. I mean, are we intelligent? Are we mature? Are we grown-ups? I feel the same way about Hitler.⁴³

Fuentes may acknowledge that Stalin did some evil things, but, to him, that pales in comparison with Stalin's nationalist achievements. At times, Fuentes even sounds like a vulgar "productive forces" Marxist in praising Stalin's drive to industrialise Russia no matter the cost. Yet Fuentes' fascist appropriation of Stalinism does not end here. He also identifies a common enemy when speaking about Trotskyism. It is instructive to examine Fuentes' historical narrative of how American politics – and especially the Left – was supposedly shaped by Trotskyism, neoconservatism, and the CIA.

Fuentes' narrative starts in New York City, circa the 1930s:

Back then, you have in New York City... in the major intellectual hubs... these small journals and they didn't have a big readership at all... these were not mass circulation magazines but they reached a very core audience of the most influential intellectual types, taste makers, opinion makers...you had these small magazines mostly in New York City and they're written by Jewish left-wingers and they actually call themselves Trotskyites, and it's debated whether they're really Trotskyists, or you know to what extent they were really communist but this is in the [later] milieu of the 50s and 60s where we're in the Cold War [in] the US...⁴⁴

Fuentes soon points out that these New York leftists of Jewish background, sympathetic to Trotsky, were allegedly weaponised by US intelligence to undermine Stalinism. Further, according to this narrative, these "Trotskyite" elements later became Zionists after the creation of Israel in 1948 and its territorial consolidation in the wars of 1967 and 1973:

So it's the basis of cold war strategic thinking, and the CIA, and CIA cultural strategy, and Cold War media influence, [and] the State Department, that we have to undermine communism, Stalinism... And so what they start to do in the 50s is they start to invest

42 Tucker Carlson. "Tucker Carlson Interviews Nick Fuentes". *YouTube*. October 27, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efBB0D4tfiY>.

43 NXR Studios. "The Inner Workings of 'World Jewry' (W/Nick Fuentes) – EP2". *YouTube*. January 7, 2026. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtC8mbV7MgU>

44 Ibid.

in these types of [“Trotskyite”] magazines. They invest in radio... Various intellectual figures give them stipends and grants at universities. And they’re not all right-wing. They’re not all sponsoring like free market neoliberalism [which] wasn’t really a thing yet. But they weren’t really sponsoring all conservatives. They’re sponsoring a lot of liberals and they’re sponsoring a lot of non-Stalinist non-communist left-wingers. They’re okay with a left-wing party coming to power, as long as they’re not going to be Stalinist [or] communist, aligned with the Soviet Union. So in the 50s and 60s they’re backing all these different very well-known publications and intellectuals through a group called the Congress for Cultural Freedom. This is really where it starts. And it’s important to understand that in the 50s and 60s you had all these Jews in America. They all came from Russia at the turn of the previous century. And they came here fleeing the pale of settlement from the pogroms, the antisemitism of the Czar. They also fled communism at various stages over the course of the life of the Soviet Union. And so many of them are deeply sympathetic to socialism. Many of them are very left-wing and they have these idealistic views about the Soviet Union that it might be a socialist paradise, that it might be like the solution. And so all of this thinking changes between Israel, Arab states, and Cold War realignment, the ’67 and ’73 war in Israel.⁴⁵

Let us reconstruct this conspiracy theory so far: the CIA, through its cultural programmes, used Jewish intellectuals and Jewish “Trotskyites” (or “Trotskyite Zionists”) to infiltrate the Left and undermine Soviet influence. What is missing from this hackneyed rant so typical of the far right? The Frankfurt School, of course. While Adorno and Marcuse are missing in this podcast episode, Fuentes adds them to his rogues’ gallery elsewhere. As he declares, and with all the verve of Julius Streicher’s *Der Stürmer*: “The Left was created by Jews –who do you think made the Left? Karl Marx himself was Jewish, The Bolsheviks were Jewish. The Frankfurt School was Jewish. Who do you think funds the modern Left: Jewish billionaires.”⁴⁶

If you have been reading up to this point, you will have noticed that between the Stalinist conspiracy theory of rootless cosmopolitanism and fascist narratives, there are disturbing parallels and affinities. What both share is the idea that a global cabal of intellectuals – either Trotskyist, Jewish, or both – funded by the CIA, is hellbent on destroying the world. This is not a materialist analysis, but something phantasmagorical and Manichean. Of course, any Marxist should be critical of imperialism and “socialists” who collaborate with it (this includes the Soviet-aligned Communist Parties). But we must also be clear on how these phenomena arise historically, rather than becoming trapped in the dualisms of East and West, or of “land” and “sea”. Already in the case of Sam Marcy, we saw how such a static version of politics – reified as “Global Class War” – turned into an apologetic for nationalism. Nationalist politics is not inherently progressive but easily falls prey to xenophobia. The internationalist

45 Ibid.

46 @McguireFra75636 (Frankie McGuire), “The Left was created by J*ws -”, Twitter, Sep 20, 2025, 4:29 p.m. <https://x.com/McguireFra75636/status/1969499156222746809>

is demonised as an inauthentic interloper and an agent of hidden conspiracies at work. Ironically, it is the genuine internationalist Marxist that becomes public enemy number one for both the Stalinist and the fascist. Thus, Stalinism uses “Trotskyism” as the signifier for what it really disavows in practice.

For the hardcore fascist, Stalinism is not the real enemy, but “Trotskyism” or international Marxism is. This was clearly the case for the most infamous leader of American neo-Nazism, “First Commander” George Lincoln Rockwell. Rockwell revealed who the true enemy of National Socialism was in his sprawling manifesto, *White Power* (1967). There, Rockwell checks all the typical boxes of the far-right conspiracy theory; that “Trotskyites” have captured the American State Department; that they are behind the Civil Rights movement, and are even looking to undermine “White” Russia.

...It should be pointed out here that vast numbers of American Communists, particularly Trotskyites and Reds in our State Department, feel that the Soviets have “betrayed” the Communist Revolution by re-creating the necessary institutions of society – authority, the family, marriage, discipline, etc. – which these Marxist fanatics consider to be “Fascist” perversions of “pure Communism”. The Trotskyite Communists, which include most of the Jew Communists, are becoming racist Communists like the yellow Chinese Communists...all Negro Black Communists in Africa, and the mongrel Negro Communists like Castro and the Cubans. These are the “way-out”, “leftist” Communists who favor Jewish Trotsky’s bloody doctrines against the more moderate policies of Russia...(It is also interesting to note that, right after the [JFK] assassination, in a printed report, I called attention to the fact, in connection with the fight between the Trotskyites and Red Chinese on one side, and Russians on the other, that “White, Gentile Khrushchev is finding himself more and more at odds with the dark, racial Communists of the World and the Jew Trotskyites who lead them”. – Within months after I wrote this, Khrushchev was dumped.)⁴⁷

Rockwell did not stop there in trying to defend “white, gentile” Soviet society from international Trotskyism. After the Bay of Pigs Invasion on 15 April 1961, Rockwell defended Castro as the “rarest of rare birds, a communist who is not crazy about Jews... Castro is anathema to all the Zionist-Wall Street Jews for grabbing their business interests”. In fact, Rockwell predicted the downfall of Castro, and the installation of a “Jewish-Trotskyist” puppet government: “... It is my belief ... [that] Castro will be out, and a new, more Jew-loving, Trotskyite red will be installed”.⁴⁸ Like many of his fellow fascists, Rockwell attempted to realign the political landscape away from Marxist ideas about class struggle in favour of race struggle. The Stalinist bureaucracy, acting on its own nationalist and narrow-minded interests could

47 George Lincoln Rockwell, *White Power* (1967), 44. [Online copy in authors’ possession]

48 William H. Schmalz, *For Race and Nation: George Lincoln Rockwell & The American Nazi Party* (William H. Schmalz, 2013), 139. [Online copy in authors’ possession]

be a potential ally for Rockwell against international Jews.

From Mussolini to Yockey to Dugin to Fuentes, there is a sneaking admiration for Stalinism within far-right circles. The origins of this fascist fascination with the General Secretary lie in the nationalist kernel beneath the Communist shell. By downplaying – if not outright dismissing – the perspective of world revolution, Stalinism opened the door to national chauvinism, antisemitism, and other reactionary ideas. By this measure, Stalinism made itself appealing to the far right. Again, this does not mean that antisemitism can be deduced a priori from socialism in one country. But the structural risk is always present, ready to be activated under periods of historical stress and crisis.

13 The Unhappy Stalinist Consciousness

The stakes of Rockhill's critique of the Frankfurt School extend well beyond the confines of his own book. As we discussed, while there is much in the work of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse we cannot accept – whether their Nietzschean influences, their historical pessimism, their rejection of mass society and popular culture, or their political accommodations and collaborations to both Stalinism and imperialism – the methodological framework Rockhill employs to condemn them is deeply flawed and cannot be separated from his own commitment to an unreconstructed Stalinism.

There is too much in Rockhill's pages that resemble a conspiracy theory. Instead of acknowledging the historical situation of the Frankfurt School – that they were a body of thinkers victimised by fascism, forced into exile, and pressured to conform to American McCarthyism and the reactionary climate of the Cold War, we are given a melodramatic conspiracy theory of a Machiavellian cabal hellbent on destroying “Actually Existing Socialism”.¹ While Adorno and Horkheimer certainly turned to the Right, and supported imperialist actions, the historical, political, and theoretical reasons for this shift are never seriously examined. Instead, the explanation collapses into the simplistic charge that they rejected Marxism-Leninism.

For Rockhill, the problem is not limited to Adorno, Horkheimer, or Marcuse, but extends to an entire academic – military – industrial – theory complex, which he portrays as operating in concert with Trotskyism, the mass media, and the financial power brokers of the Rockefeller, Ford, and Mellon families. To transform this into a proper right-wing narrative, all that is missing are the Rothschilds. Like other dubious articles he cites, Rockhill does not subject his sources from the Progressive Labor Party to careful scrutiny, even though similar claims have long circulated among right-wing conspiracy theorists such as Lyndon LaRouche. A

¹ For instance, Rockhill does not sufficiently address the FBI surveillance of the Frankfurt School during its early years in American exile. David Jenemann's 2007 study *Adorno in America* examines these episodes in detail. Here is one anecdote from 1941 involving Horkheimer that reads almost like a scene from a Coen Brothers film in its darkly comic tone: “Indeed, Horkheimer's telegram would merit no special mention were it not for the fact that someone, perhaps the Western Union clerk, found Horkheimer's activity and demeanor—or maybe just his German accent—suspicious and forwarded the telegram to the FBI. There, it joined hundreds of other documents concerning Horkheimer, his colleagues, and the Institute as part of the FBI's ongoing and pervasive investigations into potentially “subversive” activities on the part of “enemy aliens”. The telegram was subjected to cryptographic analysis in an attempt to piece together any possible code it might contain. Horkheimer, who closed many of his correspondences to Pollock with the affirmative “Alright”, was given that name as an alias, as well as the name “Harkheimer”, a misspelling courtesy of Western Union. FBI agents tracked the Horkheimers across the country, interviewing hotel clerks along their route. Horkheimer's driver was followed. The car registration was traced to Pollock. The proceedings of the investigation and all subsequent correspondence were filed under the heading “Internal Security” “. David Jenemann, *Adorno in America* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xii-xiii.

thorough-going critique of the Frankfurt School carried out along Marxist lines is certainly necessary. But a Stalinist method cannot provide that assessment.

It might be surprising to hear that there is some theoretical and political overlap between Stalinism and the first generation of the Frankfurt School, which Rockhill fails to explicitly acknowledge. They both share a deep-rooted pessimism about proletarian revolution, and, while they criticise dialectical reason in different ways, each ultimately narrows the horizon of Marxism. For the Frankfurt School, this narrowing accompanies the rejection of ontological materialism, the dialectics of nature, and other key aspects of Marx's critique of political economy. There are also important strands of neo-Kantianism and Nietzscheanism in the Frankfurt School that require proper engagement, which Rockhill largely neglects to do. Instead of a Marxist critique, Rockhill mixes facts with lurid gossip, and evaluates Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse with the dull empiricism of a police investigator. This is especially the case with Marcuse, who is pegged and insinuated as a state intelligence asset even after his break with those organisations and his later embrace of the social movements and political struggles of the 1960s. Rockhill's categorical statement that Marcuse always remained an anti-communist until his dying day is just categorically false.²

Under Stalinism, one can often pay lip service to dialectics and materialism, but the real emphasis falls on "the primacy of practice". While this phrase seems "concrete" and ultra-realistic, it is the shibboleth of an opportunist bureaucracy that does not ground its actions in theory, but grounds its theory in its own narrow-minded interests. The narrowing of dialectical reason is often the herald of pessimism and betrayal, and it is no coincidence that Stalin's purge of political opposition was accompanied by a wholesale slaughter of Marxist intellectuals, philosophers, and scholars.

Throughout *Pipers*, and in numerous conferences, Rockhill repeatedly emphasises "dialectical hermeneutics", "totality", and the need to be "non-reductive". This rhetoric is also coupled with appeals to being "concrete", experimental, and learning from history through a "trial-and-error" approach. By contrast, the "abstract" is viewed as empty talk, moralism, and something divorced from the working class. On the surface, this language sounds very Marxist, nuanced, and sophisticated. Yet, as we have seen throughout this essay, Rockhill oscillates between sounding like the later Lukács and John Dewey. While the form – or mere appearance – sounds Marxist, Rockhill's underlying approach is one-sided, vulgar, and pragmatist.

Political opportunists have often justified their abandonment of Marxist principles by invoking the demands of the "conjuncture". Somehow the conjuncture always means that political principles must be set aside and that one must simply adapt to the world as it is given. For Marcyites such as Rockhill, this logic justifies the abandonment of proletarian politics in favour of lesser-evilism on the global stage. The PSL and similar organisations have acted as cheerleaders for reactionary nationalists in Iran, Russia, and elsewhere. Even

2 Rockhill 2025, 330.

though Marcyite lesser-evilism abroad is rationalised as necessary to combat imperialism, the irony is that it boomerangs back home. Without the anchor of proletarian politics and Marxist principles, the leap to supporting “lesser evil” bourgeois liberalism becomes much easier. Indeed, both the WWP and PSL have at times supported the Democratic Party, despite its very long and well-established record of imperialism.

Almost a century ago, in the 1930s, this type of logic led many socialists to rally around Stalin and to justify every twist and turn of the party line. Supposedly, such sacrifices would lead to a better future, even as the cause is betrayed in the here and now. But we have seen throughout how the “historical necessity” of Stalinism did not advance the struggle for communism. Rather, it proved a calamity for the prospects of world revolution – in Germany, Spain, China, France, and many other places. The tragedy is that many devoted and sincere militants supported both Stalin and the Communist Parties in the belief that they were instruments of human emancipation. One can understand – but not justify – that rationalisation. Despite the benefit of historical hindsight, however, Rockhill posits a false narrative about the history of Stalinism. Like Stalinism in general, his politics rest on a deep pessimism about working-class emancipation, looking instead to benevolent strongmen for salvation – whether in China, Iran, or Russia. Ultimately, this kind of politics mirrors the very defeatism that he claims to oppose in the Frankfurt School.

Rockhill’s approach to global revolution almost appears Augustinian. Like Bernstein, he never openly disavows the final goal of communism. But he insists that we must not be wide-eyed dreamers and instead focus on the world that we are given. For Rockhill, the present age is terrible and fallen – marked by relentless violence and a kind of bourgeois hellfire that threatens to destroy the world. To put it in an eschatological register, if Marxism is an optimistic creed, and offers the path toward the kingdom of freedom, Rockhill instead presents us with an impending Armageddon without a millennium. The working class and Marxist politics play no meaningful role in escaping this imminent apocalypse. Instead, Rockhill argues we should rally around nation-states, despots, and reactionaries – so long as they wave the flag of “anti-imperialism”. Despite his caveats to the contrary, the practical implication is the indefinite postponement of communism. Rockhill’s outlook thus takes on a strangely (and stereotypically) Christian form: we must do our best in this fallen world in the hope that we will be rewarded in the hereafter with a “red” heaven. This kind of religious thinking was famously mocked by the Wobbly poet Joe Hill in his song “The Preacher and the Slave” which was directed against the Salvation Army:

Long-haired preachers come out every night
 Try to tell you what’s wrong and what’s right
 But when asked about something to eat
 They will answer with voices so sweet:

You will eat (You will eat) bye and bye (Bye and bye)

In that glorious land above the sky (Way up high)
 Work and pray (Work and pray), live on hay (Live on hay)
 You'll get pie in the sky when you die (That's a lie)³

As with Augustine of Hippo, for Rockhill the City of Man cannot reach the City of God. We must be content with existing robber states and make our peace with our fallen situation. Anyone who attempts to bring heaven to earth – to immanentise the eschaton – is denounced as being ultraleft, sectarian, and a “Trotskyite”. Further, such figures may be anathematised as the worst of heretics, in league with Satan, or, in the Stalinist register, with fascism and American intelligence. This Stalinist worldview is thus simultaneously Manichaeic toward the Left (“Trotskyites”) while remaining accommodationist toward the Right.⁴

Rockhill argues things are so dire that we must form the broadest of all possible fronts with the liberal bourgeoisie at home and with bourgeois forces abroad. Within the party itself, Rockhill calls for “cross-class” alliances. In a vulgar misreading of Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?*, he calls for a “united front” between the bourgeois intelligentsia and the workers. But this is not what Lenin argued: the petty-bourgeois intellectual does not get an equal rein on power along with the workers in the party. The party is meant to dissolve the difference between them, and not to preserve them in a distinct “front”. As Lenin himself put it: “The role of the intelligentsia is to make special leaders from among the intelligentsia unnecessary”.⁵ Rockhill’s vision of global class collaborationism – from inside the party to alliances abroad – sounds far closer to the reformist bureaucratic socialism of Kautsky than it does to Lenin’s Bolshevism.⁶

3 Industrial Workers of the World, *The Little Red Song Book* (Ypsilanti, MI: Industrial Workers of the World, 1995), 49.

4 On how Rockhill’s autobiographical sections in *Pipers*, which recount his conversion from French post-structuralism to Marxism-Leninism, resemble a postmodern version of Augustine’s *Confessions*, see Matt McManus and Damage Magazine, “Western Marxism through the Looking Glass.” *Damage Magazine*, April 8, 2026. <https://www.damagemag.com/p/western-marxism-through-the-looking>.

5 V. I. Lenin, “What the “Friends of the People” Are and How They Fight the Social-Democrats”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1894/friends/08.htm>

6 Rockhill’s views on Lenin can be found at 128:36 in “Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism? Lecture and Panel Discussion”. For a more accurate account of Lenin’s views on the party, see Greene 2024, 129-58.

14 Conclusion: Philosophy, Programme, Party

For Marxists, the question is always the same: What is to be done? But the answer, in its essentials, is also the same. What is needed today is not fundamentally different from what was needed more than a century ago. The class struggle cannot advance without certain tools: a Marxist philosophy, a political programme, and an independent socialist party. When it comes to philosophy, the struggle for a better future requires that we understand the world and how to change it. To carry out this task, we need a dialectical-materialist philosophy that grasps reality in its totality. Dialectics applies to both nature and society, and unlike Kant, we do not limit dialectics to make room for faith or superstition.

This dialectical conception informs the programme we develop concerning the nature of society, the contradictions of capitalism and imperialism, and the historical agent capable of overcoming them – i.e. the global working class. Yet philosophy and programme cannot remain abstract; they must take on concrete form in the shape of a revolutionary party. The party acts as the organisation of the conscious proletariat in its struggle to overcome bourgeois conditions and seize power. Only through the Marxist party can philosophy become reality. These three instruments – philosophy, programme, and party – are indispensable in the struggle for socialism.

However, as Brecht would say, it is the simple thing that is so hard to do. One can be clear-eyed about what is to be done in theory, but practice is an exceptionally messy business. We do not underestimate the fact that the struggle against the international bourgeoisie is, to quote Lenin, “a hundred times more difficult, protracted and complicated than the most stubborn of ordinary wars between states...”¹ But the real contradictions of capitalism are what give us the concrete hope of revolution. The crisis of capitalism cannot be overcome by capital itself; it is constantly prone to breakdown, and with all the morbid phenomena of this dying system, there will always be a deep yearning for a different society. There are more people today globally – West, East, North, and South – than in recent memory motivated to fight capitalism and are curious and interested in socialism. But without the right theory and political orientation, the inevitable struggles can be premature, co-opted, run aground, and betrayed.

This essay serves more as a critique and polemic than as a positive alternative. But if we want to avoid the tragedies and farces of the twentieth century for the rest of the twenty-first we must break decisively with the legacy of Stalinism. Despite the many historical problems of Trotskyism – and of “Actually Existing Trotskyism” – there is still no better guide

¹ V.I. Lenin, *“Left-Wing” Communism, an Infantile Disorder* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2025), 64.

to our present political dispensation than Leon Trotsky. He represented the best in the revolutionary experience and was keenly aware of the need to fight for Marxist philosophy and an independent programme. His theoretical insights and his political writings provide essential tools in the struggle against the greatest foes the working class faces in bourgeois society, in fascism, and in Stalinism.

Contrary to Stalin's claims that Trotsky worked hand in glove with Hitler, the German Führer was in fact deeply wary of the Russian revolutionary. In August 1939, mere days before the outbreak of World War II, Hitler speculated to the French ambassador that Trotsky might emerge as the victor. Trotsky reports on the exchange in one of his last articles:

In the French yellow book, a conversation is reported between the French ambassador, Couiondre, and Hitler, on August 25, nine days before diplomatic relations were severed. Hitler sputters and boasts about the pact which he concluded with Stalin: "not only a theoretical pact but, I would say, a positive one. I will vanquish, I believe, and you believe you will vanquish; but what is sure is that German blood and French blood will flow," etc. The French ambassador answers: "If I actually believed that we would be victorious, I would also have the fear that as a result of the war, there would be only one real victor-Mr. Trotsky". Interrupting the ambassador, Hitler shouted: "Why do you then give Poland a blank check?" The personal name, here, of course bears a purely conventional character. But it is not accidental that both the democratic diplomat and the totalitarian dictator designated the specter of revolution by the name of the man whom the Kremlin considers its enemy number one. Both participants in the conversation agree, as if it were self-evident, that revolution will develop under a banner hostile to the Kremlin.²

For fascists and Stalinists alike, the fear of Trotsky and "Trotskyism" symbolised their genuine horror at the prospect of international proletarian revolution. That is why they hounded, slandered, and murdered communists who adhered to Trotsky. Trotsky himself argued how, in the long run, Stalinism inflicted more damage to revolutionary socialism than even Hitler:

No one, not excluding Hitler, has dealt socialism such deadly blows as Stalin. This is hardly astonishing, since Hitler has attacked the working class organisations from without, while Stalin does it from within. Hitler assaults Marxism. Stalin not only assaults it but prostitutes it. Not a single principle has remained unpolluted, not a single idea unsullied...Socialism signifies a pure and clear social system which is accommodated to the self-government of the toilers. Stalin's regime is based on a conspiracy of the rulers against the ruled. Socialism implies an uninterrupted growth of universal equality. Stalin has erected a system of revolting privileges...Socialism

² Leon Trotsky, "The Twin Stars: Hitler-Stalin", in *The Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939-1940* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), 121-22.

would have no value apart from the unselfish, honest, and humane relations between human beings. The Stalin regime has permeated social and personal relationships with lies, careerism and treachery.³

Trotsky did not subscribe to the “great man” theory of history. He quoted Marx and Helvétius, that “[e]very social epoch demands its great men; when they do not exist, it invents them”.⁴ The material conditions that created the bureaucracy transformed Stalin into a monster, and not the other way around. If a young Koba could see what he would become as The General Secretary – a pseudo-Marxist, Borgia-like despot – he would probably vomit in horror. As Trotsky writes in his biography of Stalin:

If at that time anyone would have shown Stalin his own future role he would have turned away from himself in disgust... If Stalin could have foreseen at the very beginning where his fight against Trotskyism would lead, he undoubtedly would have stopped short, in spite of the prospect of victory over all his opponents. But he did not foresee anything... The absence of a creative imagination, the inability to generalise and to foresee, killed the revolutionist in Stalin when he took over the helm on his own. But the very same traits, backed by his authority as a former revolutionist, enabled him to camouflage the rise of the Thermidorian bureaucracy.⁵

Trotsky in the 1930s was fond of quoting an aphorism from Baruch Spinoza: Do not laugh, do not weep, but understand. He repeated it during the darkest moments of his life, when Stalin’s agents were wiping out his political comrades, friends, and family. Trotsky remained steadfast in acknowledging historical necessity, even while recognising Stalin’s monstrosity:

We possess the knowledge of the objective causes which prepared the path for reaction in the USSR. But it is no accident that Stalin rode on the crest of the Thermidorian wave. He was able to invest the greedy appetites of the new caste with their most vicious expression. Stalin does not bear any responsibility for history. But he does bear responsibility for himself and for his role in history. It is a criminal role. It is so criminal that revulsion is multiplied by horror.⁶

Trotsky believed that, for the hubris of Stalinism, historical materialism would produce its own kind of nemesis. This nemesis was not a divine agent from mythology, but a material force with a name: proletarian revolution: “Revolution will unlock all the secret compartments, review all the trials, rehabilitate the slandered, raise memorials to the victims of wantonness,

3 Leon Trotsky, “The Beginning of the End”, *Marxists Internet Archive*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1937/10/begin.htm>

4 Leon Trotsky, *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence*, trans. Alan Woods (London: Wellred Books, 2016), 606.

5 Ibid. 534 and 614.

6 Trotsky, “The Beginning of the End”.

and cover with eternal infamy the names of the executioners. Stalin will depart from the scene laden with all the crimes which he has committed – not only as the gravedigger of the revolution but as the most sinister figure in the history of mankind”.⁷

As Marx and Engels understood, social revolutions are often preceded by revolutions in thought. The Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment heralded the social revolutions of the bourgeoisie, just as the birth of historical materialism heralds the workers’ revolutions to come. In this way, theory – when it captures the needs of the time – can anticipate practice. But historical betrayals are often foreshadowed by theoretical revisionism as well. Before Stalin consolidated power, he waged a war over ideology. His commentaries on Marx and Lenin were not antiquarian exercises, but part of a broader effort to justify the Thermidorian counterrevolution. If we wish to prevent future revolutions from being betrayed, we must guard against the betrayal of theory.

7 Ibid.