British Communists, the British Empire and the Second World War

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Abstract

For a few years after its foundation in 1920 the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) attempted, energetically prompted by the Comintern, to work in solidarity with anticolonial movements in the British Empire. But after the Nazi victory in Germany the Comintern's principal concern was to defend the Soviet Union and the liberal democracies against the threat of fascism. British communists criticized the British Government for failing to defend the Empire against the threat from its imperial rivals. After the entry of the Soviet Union into the war in 1941 they vigorously supported the British war effort, including the defense of Empire. This was not though simply a manifestation of chauvinism. British communists believed that imperialism was suffering a strategic defeat by "progressive" forces and that colonial freedom would follow the defeat of fascism. These chimerical notions were greatly strengthened by the allies' promises of postwar peace, prosperity and international cooperation. In the last year or so of war British communists were clearly worried that these promises would not be redeemed, but nevertheless supported British reassertion of power in such places as Greece, Burma and Malaya. For the great majority of British communists, these were secondary matters when seen in the context of Labour's election victory of 1945 and its promised program of social-imperialist reform.

In her two volumes of quasi-official history of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB or CP), Noreen Branson lauds the Party as an indomitable fighter for colonial freedom. Similarly, the widely held view that the antifascist Popular Front strategy adopted by the Communist International (Comintern) at its Seventh Congress of 1935 involved a radical reappraisal and curtailment of the CP's anticolonial activities is dismissed by John Callaghan. In the case of India, for instance, he argues that "there was no question that the quest for collective security affected the vigour with which Indian independence should be pursued."[1] But it will be argued here that during the period 1935–1945 the Party conspicuously failed to uphold the lofty internationalist sentiments it professed to adhere to. It is true that the CP remained committed to colonial freedom: but that cause was subordinated to the anti-fascist cause, whilst antifascism was increasingly conflated with the British national interest. Particularly from July 1941, when an Anglo-Soviet anti-German alliance was forged, communists argued that Britain's Empire should be defended against the Axis powers in order that imperial resources could be deployed in the allied war effort.

It is not original to contend that the Popular Front was essentially a rationalization of the foreign policy of the Soviet Union, which was striving to build

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 65, Spring 2004, pp. 117–135
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547904000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

alliances with the liberal democratic powers against Nazi Germany.[2] It was made very clear at the Comintern's Seventh Congress that Communist Parties should regard themselves primarily as auxiliaries of the Soviet Union's diplomacy: their main task was "the struggle for peace and the defence of the USSR."[3] It should be noted though that this was not simply a matter of a cynical Soviet Union manipulating sheep-like communists.

The Comintern's new strategy was essentially a reversion to the gradualist strategy of the Second International in that it was argued that the revolutionary struggle for socialism must be postponed whilst the fascist threat was repelled. It is not hard to see that this suited the Soviet Union's diplomacy, but this strategy would have been congenial to most communists in the liberal democratic countries. In the British case, though it had been nominally committed to an insurrectionary strategy, the CP had since its foundation taken virtually no steps to prepare for revolution. Indeed, as Stuart Macintyre has pointed out, "British Marxists in the 1920s always stipulated that they were not interested in fomenting an insurrection and that they were considering the military issue only in the context of a *capitalist* recourse to armed force."[4] It is not then particularly surprising that after 1933 the great majority of British communists were far more concerned to defend liberal democracy than to seek revolutionary opportunities.

But for the greater part of the period 1933–1939 the CP held that the main threat of fascism came domestically, from British fascists and from the British Government. Though the external threat of fascism was clear enough, British communists argued that Britain could be supported in a war with another imperialist power only if a progressive "People's Government" was in power. This proviso was eventually dropped, as the Comintern became increasingly desperate to support Soviet efforts to conclude alliances with Britain and France.

In September 1939 the CP declared its support for Britain's war against Germany. A short while later, under pressure from a Comintern anxious not to jeopardize the recently concluded Nazi-Soviet Pact, the Party's Central Committee (CC) met and after a stormy meeting announced that the war was an "imperialist" war which could not be supported. At this meeting, J.R. Campbell, the editor of the Party's *Daily Worker* and one of a minority opposed to the new line, argued that "British imperialism in defending its imperialist interests, is hindering objectively the spread of the fascist system in Europe" The converse of this, of course, is that in hindering the spread of fascism in Europe, British imperialism was "objectively" (and subjectively) defending its imperialist interests. And this—how could the communist movement ally with the allied powers without "objectively" fighting for their interests—was a fundamental question which the movement never seriously addressed. The essence of the majority's position was expressed most clearly by the Party's chief ideologue, Rajani Palme Dutt: "British and French imperialism, having rejected the peace front [i.e. the Soviet Union's policy of 'collective security' against Germany], come out more and more definitely as the leaders of world reaction."[5] Implicitly, if Britain and France were to ally with the Soviet Union the war would no longer be an imperialist war.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547904000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Only a few years previously, though, the Party leadership had been adamant that alliance with the Soviet Union could not make a British war a just war. After the entry of the Soviet Union into the League of Nations in 1934, it had been suggested in a circular issued by the CP-front organization the Friends of the Soviet Union that the Soviet Union's membership of the League of Nations should cause the CP to reevaluate Lenin's teachings on imperialist war. It might now be "in the interests of the USSR, i.e., of the world revolution, for us to support our own capitalist government in a war with Germany, against Nazi aggressors." The leadership responded to this suggestion with a sharp circular in which it argued that such arguments were "utterly false." It was virtually inconceivable that Britain would ally with the Soviet Union, but if it did "it would be doing so not to support the Soviet Union but for its own imperialist aims—crushing a rival, seizing markets, enslaving whole peoples etc., and this is bound to be the case so long as the capitalist class continues to control Britain (whatever the Party in office)."[6]

What changed between 1934 and 1939? Obviously, war had come after years of mounting tension. War imposes its own logic—the CP's leaders were not immune from the intense psychological and ideological pressures of the 1930s. But the most significant factor for communists was the adoption of the Popular Front strategy. This evolving strategy was an attempt to unite all who could be united, including the liberal democratic countries, against the threat of fascism. But to unite these disparate forces would necessitate a fundamental revision of Leninist doctrine on imperialism and war.

The Comintern had arisen out of a split with those socialists who had in the First World War supported the war effort of their respective countries. This was held to have been the most fundamental breach with the principles of international socialism. It had been axiomatic for the Comintern that there could be no question of communists supporting their own country in another imperialist war: indeed precisely this point was reiterated at the Seventh Congress by the Comintern's leader, Georgii Dmitrov. But Dmitrov began there a lengthy process of undermining Leninist orthodoxy. He invented the concept of "national nihilism": communists were, he asserted, "irreconcilable opponents, on principle, of bourgeois nationalism . . . but we are not supporters of national nihilism, and should never act as such." Communists should persist in educating the working class in the "spirit of proletarian internationalism," but this did not mean that they should "sneer at all the national sentiments of the wide masses of working people." Communists in those states interested in maintaining peace should defend "to the very end the national freedom of [their] own country."[7]

Dmitrov did not explicitly state that the communists of such major powers as Britain and France should be prepared to defend their countries. But probably he did have them in mind. In May 1935, shortly before the Seventh Congress, a Franco-Soviet Pact of mutual assistance had been concluded. Thorez, the leader of the French Communist Party (PCF), then declared that "it would be monstrous to treat as an imperialist camp the camp in which the country of socialism, the country of the working class, finds itself."[8] The British Party was less

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forthright, but by the outbreak of war in 1939 had developed a case for supporting Britain in a war with Germany: it avoided however directly addressing the fundamental problem discussed earlier and outlined in its rejection of the views of the Friends of the Soviet Union. How could an alliance between the communist movement and imperialist powers be other than an alliance which furthered the interests of those powers? Could the war aims of these powers be reconciled with those of the movement? What of the British Empire, for instance? The Comintern was committed to colonial freedom, but central to the different strategies adopted by Britain in our period—appeasement from 1933 to 1939 and war from 1939–1945—was the defense of Empire. This war aim was to come quite clearly into the open in 1940, when Churchill declared that the self-determination clause of the Atlantic Charter,[9] the product of American distaste for European colonialism, did not apply to the British Empire.

The "camp" which Thorez envisaged in 1935 came into existence in 1941 (after the detour of the Nazi-Soviet Pact). It was a camp of mutual convenience made possible by both the western powers and the Soviet Union being targets of German expansionism. That the axis powers were bent on a redivision of the world in their favor had been evident from the early 1930s. Their ambitions provided the CP with one argument in favor of its developing prowar line. At a CC meeting held in March 1936, shortly after the German reoccupation of the Rhineland, Harry Pollitt, the Party's leader, remarked that "one of the important differences between 1936 and 1914 is this, that in 1914 you could not say which is the aggressor. In 1936 it stands out for all to see." Later that month the Comintern journal *Communist International* published an article by Dmitrov which laid great stress on the threat posed to democracy in "France, Belgium, Czechoslovakia . . . and England" by Nazi Germany. The fact that Britain and France were defensive powers partly because they were the main imperialist powers was addressed by neither Pollitt nor Dmitrov, and thus the undoubted fact that the fascist powers were aggressive was divorced from the political economy of imperialism.[10]

How was the Popular Front strategy to be reconciled with the dictum of Marx and Engels that the workers had "no country"? By 1938 the Comintern leadership had evidently decided that this issue had to be tackled: once, they argued, the idea that "the proletarian has no country was a profound and bitter conviction." But things had changed. Through the class struggle the working class had "gradually won a place in the nation for themselves" and "began to revise its relationship with the nation." The working class, in short, had acquired a stake in the nation. And now, the bourgeoisie's profascist policy was threatening the national interest. It was, therefore, the duty of the working class to take up the banner of national independence:

> In its struggle against fascist imperialism and its reactionary accomplices the working class and the Communist Party are the only consistent defenders of national independence . . . The reactionary bourgeoisie is betraying the national interests . . . It is the working class and its Communist Party which takes over the lega-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547904000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cies of the bourgeois revolution, maintains them against the traitors and develops them to a richer and fuller life.[11]

This passionate defense of liberal democracy against fascism rather overlooked of course the fact that the vast majority of the subjects of the colonial powers enjoyed no more democratic rights than the citizens of Britain's imperial rivals. But in 1937 the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) had made it very clear that such considerations must not be allowed to impede British and French attempts to defend their empires against their axis rivals. In response to Japan's renewed aggression against China it declared that "the peoples of Asia and the countries of the Pacific Ocean are menaced by Japanese imperialism . . . demand of the bourgeois democratic countries that they carry on a resolute struggle against the fascist aggressors."[12]

The British Party needed little prompting on this matter by the Comintern. The CP's post-Seventh Congress view had been that the most important anti-colonial work was that directed against Britain's imperial rivals. Soon after the Italian invasion of Abysinnia in October 1935 Emile Burns made this point quite clear: "The attack on Abysinnia is not *merely* an imperialist attack, but also a fascist attack. It is obvious that any victory for Italian aggression would be a tremendous encouragement to German fascism, already threatening the world with war." The Party responded to Japan's war of conquest in China with demands that the League of Nations and the British Government enforce sanctions against Japan and with industrial action. Led by Communists, dockers in Southampton, Middlesbrough, and London "blacked" cargoes bound to and from Japan. The question of China was given the greatest prominence in issue after issue of the Party's Colonial Information Bulletin.[13]

The Party launched and effectively ran the China Campaign Committee which organized public meetings and demonstrations in solidarity with China and which tried to organize boycotts of Japanese goods. The intention of the campaign seems to have been to stoke up nationalist antipathy to Japan. Certainly proletarian internationalist sentiments were not noticeable in the campaign's literature. A leaflet on the silk trade, for instance, sensationally headed "Innocent Purchasers Finance Raids of Death," called for a boycott of Japanese silk and argued that "just as the aggressor in Europe plans to dominate the western world, so Japan aims to rule over the East, completely excluding Britain."[14]

Despite these mounting international tensions, promptings by the Comintern and its own deliberations, it was only gradually and with reluctance that the British Party decided that it must support Britain in a war with its rivals. The Party's hesitancy in moving to a full-blown prowar stance was demonstrated by its vehement opposition in the Spring of 1939 to the Government's Conscription Bill. Conscription was said not to be "not a way of fighting Hitler. It is on the contrary, a way of fighting the British working classes while the British ruling classes make a deal with Hitler." But then the Comintern intervened. Campbell, by now the British delegate to the ECCI, returned from Moscow to address a

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CC meeting. The central question was the threat from Nazi Germany. The policy of the National Government was another matter:

> Today over a large part of Europe, the danger to a number of states from fascism, arises not so much in the growth of the fascist mass movement within their own country, as in the danger of intervention from without by Nazi Germany, or by Fascist Italy and so on . . .

Campbell drew the attention of the CC to Stalin's recent speech at the 18th Congress of the Soviet Party where "there had been a reference to the historic strategy of Britain. What is that strategy? It is to get into alliance with other European powers in order to ensure that no one power shall dominate the continent of Europe." The implication must have been obvious to all those present: it was not in the interests of the Soviet Union that the CPGB oppose the British government's preparations for war with Germany. This was not said, but the Party's campaign against conscription was severely curtailed. In the Summer Pollitt all but declared in favor of war: "Our country and our people will never fall victims to fascism . . . a real policy of defence means the only sure shield for preventing war. And if it fails, the people of Britain will fight as never before." On the outbreak of war the CP called for a "a war on two fronts," one against German fascism and another against Prime Minister "Chamberlain and the enemies of democracy in this country."[15] But, as we have seen, this line was quickly reversed and from October 1939 to June 1941 the CP opposed the war.

It was once argued that the CP had in this interregnum attempted to emulate the Bolshevik's First World War policy of "revolutionary defeatism" and would therefore have welcomed a British defeat. Kevin Morgan has however shown that such claims by earlier historians were misconceived.[16] Many subjects of the British Empire—the Congress Party of India, for instance—did though take the stance that Britain's difficulty was their opportunity. Here then, if the CP had wished seriously to treat the war as an imperialist war, to practice "revolutionary defeatism," was a glorious opportunity. But the Party paid little attention to the colonial question. It rarely featured in the various campaigns mounted by the Party. No mention of the Empire was made, for instance, in the "eight point programme, expressing the demands of the working people of Britain in wartime" issued by the Party's Central Committee in January 1940.[17]

Dutt, who was always far more concerned about the colonial question than most party leaders, may well have genuinely wished to give a high priority to the matter. He took advantage of the new situation to launch a new publication, *Inside the Empire*. This was a glossy, hard-hitting publication which was adamant that the war was an imperialist war. In the lead article of the first issue Dutt proclaimed that "as in 1914 the war that has broken out is a war over the new division of the world, over the bodies of the colonial peoples."[18] But despite the militant tone struck by *Inside the Empire*, the Party made little effort, beyond publicity and the odd public meeting, to take advantage of the upsurge of anti-

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colonial sentiments in the Empire. Though CC members Ben Bradley and Arthur Clegg were jailed in May 1940 after speaking in favor of Indian Independence at an Empire Day rally,[19] that the Party's heart was not in tune with the new line was demonstrated by its response to the defeat of the British Army in France in May-June 1940.

After the fall of Paris a Party Manifesto referred to the "appalling catastrophe that has befallen the French people." If the British people didn't learn the lessons of the French defeat, they too would "go under." And what were these lessons? That the French defeat was the result of the profascist sentiments of the French ruling class. Moreover, "the same kind of leaders who brought defeat to France are in high places in Britain." Accordingly, a People's Government was required, one that was "really representative of the working people, a government in which there shall be no representatives of imperialism or friend of fascism, which shall be capable of organizing the defence of the people and . . . find the way to a peace that is not a peace of subjection." Though the Manifesto did demand "full freedom to the Indian people and . . . all the peoples in the British people,"[20] this was an exceptional demand which did not play a part in the CP's main work over the next six months, its campaign for a People's Convention for a People's Government. However, either as a last-minute addition by the CP or as the result of an initiative at the Convention itself, the final program did include a demand for "national independence for India, the right of all colonial peoples to determine their own destiny, and the ending of forced partition of Ireland."[21] If the inclusion of this demand stemmed from a new desire to put the colonial question at the center of the Party's activities, any such desire was thwarted by a serious blow. The success of the Convention raised considerable anxiety in Government circles and led to a decision to use emergency powers to ban the *Daily Worker*. The CP's energies were now directed mainly to a campaign to end the ban (it was not rescinded until August 1942) and once again little was heard of the colonial question.

After the Soviet Union's entry into the war, British Communists became highly committed supporters of the allied war effort. The next few years, if measured by membership statistics, were to be the most successful in the Party's history. Membership had increased steadily since 1935, as the Party began to jettison revolutionary perspectives and stress patriotic and antifascist themes, but burgeoned after 1941, more than doubling between 1941 and 1943.

CP Membership.[22]

1935	1937	1939	1941	1943	1945
7,500	12,500	17,756	22,738	55,138	45,435.

The Party's bald membership statistics are not very reliable: the reported statistics usually do not reveal how many left the Party. It seems clear that it experienced a very high turnover of members in the war years.[23] Even so, it is cer-

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tain that the CP enjoyed a vastly increased membership, which doubtless intensified pressures on the Party to maintain its new, patriotic orientation. It would have been an exceptionally principled party—and the CP was hardly that—which would have questioned, still less changed, its line in a period of rapid growth. Though few British people (including the members of the CP) were very interested in colonial matters, there nevertheless existed in Britain a pervasive consciousness of Empire and imperial greatness. The CP's robust defense of the Empire between 1941 and 1945 presumably was one factor fuelling its new popularity. Though the CP remained nominally committed to colonial freedom, by 1945 the Party's leadership had become unwilling to jeopardize its new popularity by seriously fighting for colonial freedom.

In 1941 the Soviet Party journal *Bolshevik* had made clear the line to be taken on the Empire. An article on *The Role of the British Empire in the Current War* gave to the Empire the "highest place side by side with the USSR in the great coalition of democratic peoples fighting fascism." The fact that the peoples of Britain's colonies did not enjoy democratic freedoms was not addressed. According to the standard history of the Indian Party, *Bolshevik's* "treatment of India put it in the same category with the self-governing dominions, as though to conceal the fact that it was not already a free country." The main import of the article was made bluntly clear: India's resources had not yet been fully utilized, but "the further the mobilisation of these forces for the struggle against Hitlerite fascism proceeds, the better."[24]

The British Party's determination that the Empire be defended became particularly evident as Japan conquered British colonies in the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor. The CP's fury at the loss of these colonies, though, cannot be attributed simply to nationalism. Party leaders still had a genuine commitment to (eventual) colonial freedom. Moreover, they believed—with considerable justification, given Japanese atrocities in China—that the peoples of the British Empire would suffer even more grievously under Japanese imperialism than they had under British. As we have just seen, the Soviet factor too was present. But even so, the fact there is no trace of significant anxiety in the Party regarding its defense of Empire does suggest that nationalist sentiments were growing. By the end of the war such sentiments had developed into what can only be called social chauvinism.

After Pearl Harbor Dutt was swift to see the danger to the Empire and complained that the Government was failing to fully mobilize "all the five hundred million people of the British Empire" against the Axis Powers. In India, "only 0.25% of men had been recruited to the army . . . and meanwhile the authorities here wring their hands over the problems of manpower." Therefore reform in the Empire was essential in order to win the support of the colonial peoples for the war. In this respect, Churchill's insistence that the self-determination clause of the Atlantic Charter did not apply to the Empire was "a blow in the face to the aspirations of India and the colonial peoples." The CP continued nevertheless to support Britain's defense of Empire. According to the Party there was no alternative, for, as Dutt attempted to reassure progressive opinion in the USA:

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"Indian national interests cannot be regarded in isolation, but must coincide, as they can and do in truth coincide, with the common interests of all nations, and specifically of the United Nations, of victory over fascism."[25]

Only a few years previously Dutt would vehemently have denied that the interests of Britain and India could coincide. It is not hard to conclude therefore that there was an element of sophistry in his arguments. But perhaps not. In the desperate situation of August 1941, Dutt, buoyed by memories of the outcome of the previous world war, had confidently expected this new such war to end in victory for the progressive forces of the world: "in the broadest historical sense the avenues of escape are narrowing for world imperialism." Despite Churchill's protests, the Party leadership probably believed that the Atlantic Charter's promise of self-determination could be made good in the course of the war. Given the leadership's close links with some leading Labour Party members, it is possible that they had some knowledge of Cabinet divisions on this matter. Churchill had recently felt it necessary to reiterate his stance on this matter after the Labour leader and Deputy Prime Minister Clement Attlee had told African students in London that the Charter did apply to the British Empire.[26]

Internationalist sentiments, though, were little in evidence as the Japanese captured one after another of Britain's Asian colonies in 1942. In a speech at the Stoll Theatre in London, Pollitt attempted to rouse his audience with the Japanese "menace" to the "Dutch East Indies, Burma, India, and Australia." Indicative of the anxieties aroused by the Japanese threat to the Empire, Pollitt deployed the bellicose style he reserved for such occasions, and, after making an aside that the enemy could not be negotiated with, demanded that "whoever tries in any way to support the enemy brands himself a traitor who should be shot out of hand."[27]

The Party excoriated the military authorities, colonial administrators and planters for incompetently and selfishly betraying the national interest. The loss of Malaya prompted it to complain that "in four weeks Britain has lost practically the whole of Malaya, a country fabulously rich in tin and rubber. The people of Britain are amazed and angry." It was asserted that there should have been a "scorched earth" policy. But this had not been applied because "big merchants, rubber planters and tin-mine owners did not like to see the mines and estates going up in flames." A pamphlet by Ben Bradley, the Party's old India hand, once imprisoned for his revolutionary activities there, proclaimed that "wherever the flame of freedom still burns, people have watched with bitter anger, the advances made by the Japanese . . . one after another the enemy seemed to walk through our defence as a knife goes through butter. Now Burma is in peril, and India." The leadership became particularly alarmed when it learnt that some Burmese people had taken up arms to fight with the Japanese. The membership was advised that this was "a serious warning to how dangerous the situation can become in India as the Japanese approached the frontier." Whether such people were to be numbered among those to be "shot out of hand" was not clear.[28]

It was particularly the Japanese threat to India that exercised the CP. The

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British Party appears to have played a significant role in overcoming widespread resistance to supporting the British war effort in the Indian Party. True or not, it was widely believed in India that the authorities allowed to be smuggled into India a message from Pollitt to the Communist Party of India (CPI) informing them of the Comintern's new line. According to Indian Communist veterans, the Indian Party finally accepted that they must support the war after the return from Britain of a member who had discussed the matter with Pollitt and Dutt.[29]

The British Party was adamant that the Indian people must support the war and that such support should not be conditional on offers of reform and eventual independence. It did however advocate reform and steps towards independence. It demanded the release of political prisoners, that the government declare the Atlantic Charter "applicable to India and Burma" and "enter into direct negotiations with the Indian national movement and with the Burmese Cabinet with a view to finding the effective basis of cooperation for the common war effort."[30] But the Party press and archives suggest that little was done in practice to fight for these demands. The leadership did occasionally urge Party members to raise the question of India, but whatever they may have done has left little trace. In the considerable files left by the Party's Manchester & Salford District Committee, for instance, virtually the only reference to India is contained in a handbill for a second front demonstration which demanded, in the interests of the war effort, that Indians should have "their own National Government."[31]

The CP gave a warm welcome to the "Cripps Mission" to India, an attempt to gain the support of Congress leaders (released from prison shortly after Pearl Harbor) for the war effort. Stafford Cripps, a British Cabinet Minister, flew to India in March 1942 with authorization to offer India full independence after the war. Congress was not impressed: only immediate self-government would do. Talks broke down and in April Cripps returned to Britain. At an emergency meeting of the India League, Willie Gallacher, the Party's sole Member of Parliament, showed some internationalist sentiment by declaring that it appeared that the British "were specially appointed by God to rule over other peoples." But the Party's general response to the breakdown of negotiations was to stress the resultant threat to India: "The failure of negotiations and the return of Sir Stafford Cripps is a great tragedy . . . India is in grave danger, the threat of Japanese invasion is imminent."[32]

Frustrated by British intransigence, Congress threatened to resort to civil disobedience. Alarmed at this prospect, Pollitt wrote to Nehru. Asserting that everything had to be subordinated to the defeat of Fascism, Pollitt professed his admiration for the "forbearance Congress has displayed, despite all the insults put upon it and the senseless prosecution of its leaders." Nevertheless, the "suggestion" that Congress might adopt a policy of noncooperation had "caused grave disquiet amongst all who fight in this country for India's freedom." Pollitt's advice was that Congress should support the war effort notwithstanding British policy: if Congress "proclaimed to the whole world that while reiterating its claim for independence, it was going to take its place alongside the Chinese, Russian, American and British people in active resistance to fascist aggres-

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sion . . . then I am convinced that your world influence would be enormously strengthened."[33]

In an indication of its alarm at the unrest in India, the CP made public its disagreement with Congress. Though the main responsibility for the failure of the Cripps Mission lay with the British Government, it had been "a grave mistake" for Congress to consider "the use of civil disobedience." It was however "vital that the British people should know that no immediate civil disobedience was decided on; on the contrary, it was definitely stated that every effort would be made to secure a settlement by negotiation." The British Government was not so forbearing as Congress: in the Summer its leaders were once more imprisoned. This was vigorously denounced by the Party but the respectful tone of a letter sent by Pollitt to Churchill makes it very clear that the CP would not let the matter jeopardize national unity. Referring to the Party's requests (a more appropriate word than "demands") that the detainees be released and that "fresh negotiations" to "secure a National Government for India" be opened, Pollitt wrote to "submit with all urgency that these steps are essential in the interests of Britain, no less than those of India, as well as of the United Nations and the cause of victory over the common fascist enemy."[34]

Shortly afterwards, Leo Amery, the government minister responsible for the colonies, informed Parliament that he would not release the Congress leaders. This was roundly denounced on the front page of the Party's *Daily Worker*, which a few days later carried a prominent article by Krishna Menon, who declared that the "Government's India policy stands out in marked contrast to the freedom to which millions aspire . . . the war is still the Empire's war in India." But despite increasing British violence against protesters, the Party maintained its steadfast refusal to do anything concrete to fight for Indian independence. In early October the *Daily Worker* published a letter from the Indian Communist Party, which opposed the Congress policy of noncooperation. It complained that although it "had saved the majority of industrial centres in India from stoppages and sabotage . . . some of the trusted leaders of the Party are still in gaol, and hundreds of communists have been arrested."[35]

Famine and mass starvation in Bengal in 1943 led to new heights of unrest, in which many were killed by the British authorities. The CP did organize some protests at these developments. A CP-led deputation attempted to see Amery, but was refused admittance and a rally, at which the famous actress Sybil Thorndike spoke, was held at the Central Hall. In April four members of the CPI, who were allegedly responsible for the murder of a policeman during a demonstration, were executed. The issue of the *Worker* in which the execution of the "Katyur Martyrs" was announced appeared with a black border and an appeal fund was established. Pollitt claimed that the establishment of the fund was "a particularly important gesture that may have very far-reaching effects. There can be no finer way of showing solidarity with the people of India . . . than by a donation to this fund." Pollitt was right; it was a gesture. Concerning Menon's analysis of British policy in India, the call of Indian communists, famine, mass starvation, killings and executions—evidently such things were re-

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grettable but would not deter British communists from supporting the British war effort.[36]

For the CP, British outrages in India had to be weighed against "progressive" developments elsewhere. By 1943 the tide of war had turned on the eastern front. And if British policy in India had caused the CP to doubt whether Britain would honor the promises of the Atlantic Charter, such doubts seem to have been dispelled by the pledges made by the allied leaders at the Teheran Conference of late 1943. The Teheran Declaration gave assurances of a new postwar world of peace, progress, prosperity and national self-determination.

Teheran, the CP argued, offered a road to colonial freedom. But it was to be very different road from that once envisaged. Colonial freedom began to be regarded as something to be given to the colonial peoples by their colonial masters rather than as something to be wrested from them. International economic and political cooperation by the great powers was now the key to progress. A new primer for recruits by the Party's Education Department revealed how the Party's ideology had been transformed by the impact of Popular Front and war: it made no mention of imperialism. In the CP's new worldview, relationships between imperialist states and their colonies needed no longer be antagonistic. Significantly, the word imperialism had virtually disappeared from the Party's lexicon, a point made in a letter of complaint in the *Worker*. The letter drew no response.[37]

A pamphlet by Ben Bradley, published in late 1944, demonstrates how profoundly the CP's outlook had changed in the course of the war. Bradley was an old dog who could be taught new tricks. Gone was the revolutionary outlook which had informed his earlier activities. Suffused with the principles of the Teheran Declaration, the pamphlet called on the British Government to institute programs for all-round development of its colonies and to govern constitutionally through a "properly elected assembly or legislature," not through a Governor. Though the Labour Party's argument that some colonial peoples were not yet ready for independence was criticized, there was in truth little essential difference between Labour and Communist policies on this matter. The CP's view that it was the responsibility of the British Government to hand over power to the colonial peoples, smacked of the "white man's burden" hardly any less than Labour's. Bradley paternalistically argued that the British Government could emancipate the colonial peoples and institute relations of mutual benefit. It should "eliminate present forms of exploitation," develop the economies of the colonies, "introduce labour legislation" and so forth. Lest any of his readers should react with skepticism to these schemes, Bradley assured them that "a prosperous Britain cannot be envisaged without prosperity for the colonial countries."[38]

The conference of allied leaders at Yalta in February 1945 (at which Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin announced that international agencies would be established to construct the new postwar order) convinced the CP's leadership that the promises of Teheran were to be made good. Indicative of their cheerful view is a schoolmasterly ticking-off by leading member J.R. Campbell of the

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British and US representatives for squabbling at a civil aviation conference in Chicago over production quotas. There was now no need for such conflict, according to Campbell. Postwar reconstruction, financed by the World Bank (recently established at the Bretton Woods Conference) would ensure world plenty. The reconstruction of "backward countries" would create markets "for the capital goods industries of Britain and the USA." Before quarrelling "over the division of markets in the world, there should be a concerted effort on the part of the United Nations" to expand markets in such countries.[39]

Promotion of such agencies as the World Bank presented some knotty problems for the CP: once it had argued that relationships between the colonial powers and the colonies were necessarily exploitative. But now it claimed that under the new democratic order forged by the war the western powers could take a leaf out of the Soviet Union's book. There, resources from its "more advanced republics" were transferred to its "less advanced" ones. If this practice were followed in the west, then relations of mutual benefit could be established between the great powers and their colonies. Furthermore, the representatives in the new international agencies of such countries as Britain and the USA would "be responsible directly to their Governments and not to banking and financial circles." And "with progressive governments in such countries, these members too will be pressing for policies beneficial to all countries."[40]

Whatever the democratic pieties of Teheran and Yalta, it was becoming evident that the allied powers were determined that the postwar world would one be one shaped in their interest. Nevertheless, the CP welcomed the reconquest of Britain's colonies, always qualified with platitudinous remarks to the effect that Britain should respect the desires of the colonial peoples. In March, for instance, the Party welcomed the continuing advance of the British in Burma and applauded "the magnificent fighting march of the 14th Army through the jungle hills of North Burma which has brought them out into the plains of Central Burma." It was important though to "convince Burma that the British armies really come as liberators. This means, in the first instance, a clear-cut declaration of our intentions for the broad outline of Burma's political future."[41]

But British power was forcibly reimposed, in Burma and elsewhere. In June, the Communist Party of Burma wrote to the CPGB complaining about such activities as forcible dispersion of meetings and confiscation of newspapers. The Burmese Party requested the British Party to raise these matters with the "Secretary of State and members of the Government." The Party may well have done this, but no public fuss was made. British policy in Burma was clear evidence that the promises made at Yalta were spurious. The CP was nevertheless not deflected from its determination to promote them. It is conceivable that Party leaders may have believed, despite all the contrary evidence, that once the war was won the "progressive" forces of the world would be able to compel the old colonial powers to grant self-determination. This had been the belief of Maurice Levitas, a Party member who fought in Burma. He had believed that the Soviet Union would force Britain to grant national freedom to Burma.[42]

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But that summer, in a further sign that the Yalta Communiqué had as much relevance to the colonial question as biblical injunctions to be good neighbors, the French army shelled Damascus to quell there popular protests against France's reconquest of Syria and the Lebanon. The CP's response was to reprimand the French for the use of force and to point out that the British, US and Soviet Governments had demanded that the French desist: "the whole effort of the free world today is to replace force in international affairs." But there were other issues than the use of force. Oil in the Middle East was owned by British and American oil companies. The French, in response to protests against their use of force, had demanded negotiations on the oil resources of the middle east. This was quite reasonable. The British and the Americans could not "maintain they, and they alone, are to have exclusive control of the world's oil, while British intrigues to extend the grip of British finance on this oil can only lead to antagonism." The oil should be therefore be shared with the French. Of the interests of the Arab people in this matter, the Party had nothing to say.[43]

In August, Japan surrendered. Perhaps now, lifted from the constraints imposed by war, the CP would adopt a more militant stance on the colonial question? But the Party was convinced that international and national unity would be as essential for postwar reconstruction as it had been for the defeat of fascism. The CP had great hopes of the new Labour Government, which had taken office in July. But even after this government had demonstrated its imperialist credentials by continuing the repressive policies of the previous coalition government in Burma, Malaya, Indo-China, Indonesia and elsewhere, the Party continued to chase the chimera of a world of peaceful reconstruction, cooperation and mutual benefit. It sternly criticized Labour's colonial policy, but was disinclined to take any concrete steps to oppose it and clearly regarded it as a subordinate matter, when viewed in the context of Labour's domestic program of welfarism and nationalization.

In September, CP-led dockers and Indonesian seamen in Australia 'blacked' a cargo of arms headed for Indonesia, where Dutch troops were engaged in quelling a nationalist uprising. Shortly afterwards, British dockers were in dispute over pay and conditions. Dutch troops and materials bound for Indonesia had passed through British ports. Here was a golden opportunity for the CP to put into practice its professed internationalist sentiments, an opportunity to link the struggle of British workers with that in the colonies. But though a circular sent to the membership in October suggests that such action was being considered, nothing was done. "Comrades engaged in war industries" were urged to "look out for materials and Dutch troops to Indonesia." It was "essential" that the Party "should try and emulate the splendid example of the Australian dockers and seamen in refusing to handle any cargoes destined for Indonesia."[44]

Shortly after members had been urged to "look out for" materials bound for Indonesia, the *Worker* carried a report that dockers in Sydney had found "British ships . . . loaded with cargo which included munitions" which they "suspected" were bound for Java. It was further reported that "Australian Labour circles are expressing anxiety at the lack of any concrete action by British Labour

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against the dispatch of Dutch troops and munitions to Java." But anxiety in CP circles was rising over industrial action, seen as a serious threat to national reconstruction, in British docks. If Party leaders had been considering calling on British workers to "black" ships bound for Indonesia they had second thoughts. Responsibility was passed on to the Government: the anxieties in Australia were now said to be about the "continued absence of news of action from the British Labour Government."[45]

The Party leadership should not have had the least expectation that the Government would take any action to impede the Dutch Government. By this time British troops too were involved in the suppression of the uprising in Indonesia. Only recently, the *Worker* had admonished Prime Minister Atlee for insisting in the Commons that Britain had an obligation to support the Dutch: the British Government also had "an obligation to the Atlantic Charter," which the events in Indonesia had "put to shame." Even so, the Party continued to insist that the cause of Teheran and Yalta was not lost: "the fight of the Indonesian people," insisted Arthur Clegg, "*is* the fight of the United Nations for prosperity, democracy and peace." Similarly, the "offensive" of British imperialism in Indo-China, where the British were using Japanese troops to suppress the nationalist movement, was said to be in conflict with the principles of the UN Charter which the people of Indo-China were dying for.[46]

By late 1945 it was quite clear that the allies had issued false prospecti at Teheran and Yalta and that the new colonial order was going to be essentially the same as the old. That this was now of little concern to the great majority of CP members was made equally clear by the Party's 18th Congress, held in November that year. The Party leadership's Congress discussion statement contained a perfunctory four lines on colonial matters. This indifference was clearly shared by the great majority of Party members. Contributions to the pre-Congress discussion, even those by critics of Party policy, rarely raised the matter. Whilst there were several manifestations of disquiet regarding Labour's foreign policy, it was the anti-Soviet rather than the colonial aspect of this policy that aroused particular concern. One correspondent did write to complain that the Party devoted far too little time and energy to the colonial question. *Inside the Empire*, he pointed out, "appears once in three months, a mere eighty pages a year," whilst "the space devoted to the Colonies in 'World News and Views' seems to get smaller and smaller, while anything more than a few lines 'mention' in the 'Daily Worker' is a rarity."[47]

Few members of the Party seem to have been moved by such criticisms. The colonial question was scarcely mentioned in the Congress resolutions or at the Congress. Pollitt did make a few remarks on the matter in his Congress speech. He argued, for instance, that "the old imperialist basis of the British economy, the imperial tribute from foreign and colonial investment" must go. But arguments such as these must be assessed in the light of the Party's energetic support for measures designed to advance the national interest. On the question of trade, for instance, Pollitt was quite prepared to accept the continuation of unequal trading relationships. Modernization of Britain's basic industries would "place

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Britain in a position where her chemicals, machinery and consumer goods can take a leading place on the world market."[48]

We should recall that at the time of the congress, British troops were involved in the suppression of a popular uprising in Greece and of national liberation movements in Indo-China and in Indonesia. In a remarkable and complacent reference to these colonial wars, Pollitt claimed that:

> . . . our British lads did not put on uniform to protect the profit-making interests of imperialist exploiters in Asia, whether British, Dutch, French or American. They did not join up to shoot down their own comrades of other lands, who for so many long years have put up such a magnificent fight for freedom from imperialism.[49]

The fact is that "British lads" were shooting down the people "of other lands." Whilst we need not doubt Pollitt's sincerity in opposing this policy, it was probably not that important to him. The CP's preoccupation was with the British working class and the British nation. How else could the Party have given, as it had, its enthusiastic support to Labour's impeccably social-imperialist election program? British workers were to get their reward for supporting the war in the shape of the National Health Service, nationalization and full employment. British colonial policy was not going to divert the CP from supporting the Labour Government. Thus, in his reply to the Congress discussion on Labour's foreign and colonial policy (which had concentrated on Labour's attitude to the Soviet Union), Pollitt argued "Don't let us forget that the people of this country see nationalization of the coal industry and the Bank of England and the reduction in income tax, as well as Greece and Indonesia, and we are making a great mistake if we don't grasp this."[50] There is no evidence that it occurred to anyone at the Congress that the one helped to make the other possible. Dollars earned by British colonies such as Malaya were crucial to British postwar reform and reconstruction.

Not surprisingly then, though a Congress resolution expressed the Party's "dissatisfaction" at the colonial policy of the Labour Government and welcomed "the growth and strengthening of the national liberation movement," it did not commit the CP to any attempt to take practical steps in support of that struggle. Responsibility was shuffled off onto the Labour Government, which was asked "to outline a clear policy for the achievement by the Colonial peoples of equal and free status among the nations of the world" and to institute a program of democratic reform in the colonies. That such a resolution could be passed at a time when the Government was making very "clear" indeed its colonial policy, is indicative of the CP's great apathy on the colonial question.[51]

For Marika Sherwood, the CP's record on the colonial question is a "sorry tale."[52] In the present writer's view this is a valid judgement if applied to the Party's post-1935 record, but harsh if applied, as Sherwood, would have it, to the Party's early history. It is hard to imagine a member of any other organization of the British left engaging in the type of activity which led to Ben Bradley's im-

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prisonment in India. Prior to 1935, though it did have to be prompted by the Comintern,[53] the Party did support national liberation movements in the British Empire. But after 1935 this support disappeared as quickly as the threat to the British Empire from Britain's imperial rivals increased. Even after taking into account the CP's passionate desire to fight fascism and defend the Soviet Union, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the arguments offered in support of the policies adopted after 1935 were, to some degree at least, rationalizations of Eurocentric and social-chauvinist priorities. There is no reason to doubt that the CP's leaders genuinely wanted eventual colonial freedom, but their critical support for the British Government's ruthless defense of Empire in our period does suggest that they had a much greater commitment to the defense of the British nation. They certainly had a greater commitment to the defeat of fascism in Europe. In September 1939, Harry Pollitt said "I am a Communist. I hate the ruling class of this country, but I hate the German fascists more."[54] Hating the British ruling class but hating the German fascists more was probably the predominant sentiment among British Communists in the years around the Second World War and it explains a great deal about their conduct.

NOTES

1. Notes Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927–1941* (London, 1987); N. Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain1941–1951* (London, 1997); J. Callaghan, "The Communists and the Colonies: Anti-imperialism between the Wars," in *Opening the Books: Essays in the Social and Cultural History of Communism,* ed. Geoff Andrews et al (London, 1995), 19.

2. See Kevin McDermott & Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (Basingstoke, 1996) for a summary of the historiography of the relationship between the Comintern and its constituent parties.

3. G. Dmitrov, *The United Front* (Chicago, 1975), 11.

4. Stuart Macintyre, *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain 1917–1933* (London, 1986), 192.

5. Francis King and George Mathews, eds., *About Turn: The Communist Party and the Outbreak of the Second World War: the Verbatim Record of the Central Committee Meetings, 1939* (London, 1990), 105, 77.

6. Circular to membership, March 26, 1934, CP/IND/DUTT/31/1, Communist Party Archive at the National Museum of Labour History, Manchester, UK (hereafter cited as CPA).

7. Dmitrov, *United Front,* 79.

8. Carr, Edward Hallett, *The Twilight of Comintern 1930–35* (London, 1982), 204.

9. The clause declared that Britain and the USA would "respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live". A.J.P. Taylor, *British History 1914–45* (Oxford, 1965), 535.

10. Minutes of CC meeting. April 16–17, 1936, microfilm reel 15, CPA; G. Dmitrov, "The People's Front Struggle Against Fascism and War," *Communist International* November 1936, 32.

11. "The Working Class and the Nation," *Communist International,* November 1938, 24.

12. J. Degas, ed., *The Communist International 1919–1943. Documents Volume 3 1929–1943* (London, 1971), 416.

13. Cited in Branson, *History 1927–1941,* 139; The Bulletin had been launched after the dissolution of the League Against Imperialism (LAI) to promote the Party's line of democratic reform in the colonies.

14. China Campaign ephemera, CP/ORG/MISC/2/14, CPA.

15. *Daily Worker,* April 26, 1939; Minutes of CC of May 21, 1939, microfilm reel 17. CPA; *Will it be War?* July 1939; *Daily Worker,* September 2, 1939.

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16. Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics 1935–1941* (Manchester, 1989). For the traditional view see Henry Pelling, *The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile* (London, 1975) and D. Childs, "The British Communist Party and the War, 1939–1941: Old Slogans Revived," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 12 (1977).

17. *Daily Worker*, January 24, 1940.

18. *Inside the Empire*, February 1940.

19. J.E. Jones, "The Anti-Colonial Work of the Communist Party of Great Britain," (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wolverhampton, 1997), 181.

20. *Daily Worker*, June 22, 1940.

21. See Morgan, *Ruptures*, 201–213 for an account of the People's Convention movement. *Daily Worker*, January 14, 1941. Over 2,000 delegates attended the Convention, which the CP had successfully used to gather together various strands of antiwar sentiment. Its success can be gauged by an endorsement by the famous actor Michael Redgrave, father of Vanessa.

22. Andrew Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow 1920–1943* (Manchester, 2000), 284 (in some cases Thorpe provides two figures for different months. Here the value for the later month is always cited). The interesting fact that membership held up well in the 1939–1941 period will be noted (see Morgan, *Ruptures*, 310–318 for a discussion of the possible reasons for this phenomenon).

23. In April 1942 the Party claimed that it had had grown to 47,932 members in the first three months of the year, an increase of 111 percent between January and March, a calculation based on the dubious premise that no members had left between January and March. We do have evidence from a little later in the war that there was a very high turnover of members. Statistics provided by the National Organiser, Peter Kerrigan, at the conclusion of a membership campaign launched in 1943 are more revealing than usual. In March 1944 Kerrigan reported that 12,542 new members had been recruited. If we take the lower, 55,138, of the two figures reported for 1943 as being more likely to be accurate, then we would expect the Party to have had 67,680 members. But it could report only 45,744 registered members. If the membership statistics on which these calculations are based are accurate, then around 22,000 people either left the CP or joined but failed to register in 1943–44 *World News & Views*, November 21, 1943, February 19, 1944, and April 15, 1944.

24. Gene Donald Overstreet and M. Windmiller, *Communism in India* (Berkeley, 1959), 193.

25. "Notes of the Month," *Labour Monthly*, 24.1 (January 1942), 3–8; Preface to a special American edition of *A Guide to the Problems of India.* The work was not in fact published, but the preface has survived, CP/IND/DUTT/11/03, CPA.

26. "Notes of the Month," *Labour Monthly* 23.8 (August 1941), 348–356; PREM 4 43A/3, Public Record Office, London, UK (hereafter cited as PRO).

27. Printed account of Pollitt's speech, CP/IND/DUTT/29/12, CPA.

28. "Malaya, End of an Epoch," *World News and Views*, January 31, 1942; B. Bradley, *India: What We Must Do*, April 1942; PB circular April 2, 1942, CP/CENT/CIRC/01/02, CPA.

29. Overstreet & Windmiller, *India*, 197, 199.

30. *World News & Views*, August 16, 1941; December 20, 1941.

31. CP/LOC/NW/1/4, CPA.

32. Box 9, File F, Topic Collection "Political Attitudes and behaviour 1938–1956," Mass Observation archive at the University of Sussex, UK; *World News & Views*, April 25, 1942.

33. Pollitt to Nehru, July 29, 1942, CP/IND/POL/3/1, CPA; The CP had developed warm links with Congress. Dutt and Nehru had first made contact during the latter's student days at Cambridge. J. Callaghan, "Jawarharlal Nehru and the British Communist Party," *Journal of Communist Studies* 7 (1991), 350–366; These links had been close enough for Nehru to speak at a CP CC meeting in 1938, microfilm reel 9, CPA.

34. *World News & Views*, August 15, 1942; August 29, 1942.

35. *Daily Worker*, September 12, 1942; September 17, 1942; September 22, 1942; and October 3, 1942. The CPI was rewarded for its support for the war by being granted legal status in July 1942. Overstreet & Windmiller, *India*, 206.

36. *Daily Worker*, November 5, 1943; April 8, 1943; Undated circular to membership, CP/CENT/CIRC/01/03, CPA.

37. "Essentials of Communist Theory: A Three Lesson Syllabus," CP/CENT/ED/1/4, CPA; *Daily Worker*, September 5, 1943.

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38. *The Colonies, the Way Forward*, November 1944.
39. "Anglo-American Conflict," *Labour Monthly* 27.2. (Feb. 45), 49.
40. "Foreign Lending and the International Bank," *World News and Views*, April 21, 1945.
41. *World News and Views*, March 31, 1945.
42. CP/CENT/INT/13/01, CPA; interview with Maurice Levitas, November 1996.
43. *World News & Views*, June 9, 1945.
44. *Daily Worker*, September 27, 1945; Weekly Letter of October 14, 1945, CP/CENT/CIRC/63/03, CPA.
45. *Daily Worker*, October 27, 1945; November 1, 1945.
46. *Daily Worker*, October 18, 1945; "Indonesian War of Independence," *Labour Monthly* 27.12. (December 1945), 362 (emphasis in the original); *World News and Views*, November 10, 1945.
47. For the EC's discussion statement and the pre-Congress discussion see *World News and Views*, Sept.-Nov. 1945.
48. *Resolutions and Agenda for the 18th Congress; Communist Policy for Britain*, (Report of the 18th Congress), 11.
49. *Resolutions*, 19.
50. *Resolutions*, 31.
51. *Resolutions*, 70–71.
52. M. Sherwood, "The CPGB, the Colonies and Black Britons," *Science and Society*, 60 (1996), 160.
53. See Partha Sarathi Gupta, *Imperialism and the British Labour Movement 1914–1964* (London, 1974); A. J. MacKensie, "British Marxists and the Empire: anti-Imperialist Theory and Practice 1920–45" (Ph. D thesis, University of London, 1978); Stephen Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics: The Left and the End of Empire 1918–64* (Oxford, 1994); and Jones, *Anti-Colonial*, for accounts of the CP's early anticolonial work.
54. Minutes of CC September 24, 1939, microfilm reel 10, CPA.

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